

Disobedient motherhoods

Esther Vivas



Nadia Sanmartin

Motherhood is a prisoner of stereotyped discourse that condemns us as bad mothers for not looking after and giving sufficient time to our children or as failed professionals for not ensuring our non-stop availability for work. Success or survival in the work place is virtually incompatible with having offspring. It is always our fault.

Women face pressure on two fronts: pressure to be selfless mothers, as dictated by the patriarchal mantra, and pressure to succeed in the labour market, building a successful career without renouncing having children, as established by the rules of neoliberal capitalism. However, in most cases it is a matter of surviving as best one can in unstable jobs. The option of motherhood is reduced to two archetypes: the 'angel of the home' or 'superwoman'. Both models fit nicely into the system, whichever we are expected to follow.

A historical perspective

History has seen the generalisation of a certain ideal of the good mother, one who first serves her child and then her husband. The myth of the perfect mother who is devoted, married, monogamous, selfless and happy in her role, and who always puts others' interests first as she is not supposed to have any of her own. A myth that is presented as timeless, when in fact its foundations are specific to western modernity.

Based on this ideological construct, the patriarchal and capitalist system has relegated mothers to the private, invisible sphere of the home, undervaluing their work and

consolidating gender inequalities. Women have no choice other than childbirth, as dictated by biology, their social duty and religion. An argument, based on biological destiny, which has served to hide the huge amount of reproductive work carried out by women. The patriarchy reduced femininity to motherhood, and women to the condition of mothers.

During the 20th century, the mass incorporation of women into the labour market (and the corresponding financial autonomy), the generalisation of a model of urban society where less pressure is placed on individuals, and access to contraceptive methods turned having children into an option rather than an obligation. But when motherhood stopped being women's only destiny, the dilemma of motherhood emerged, i.e. a choice and desire that was hard to square with others.

From the 1980s, while more and more women joined the labour market, a public pro-motherhood and pro-family discourse became more widespread. The ideal of the good mother became much more complex and plural. Women were no longer devoted mothers, as they had been until then, but now became 'super mums' [1], as selfless as ever, while also having an active working and public life and, of course, a perfect body. This is the 'new momism' [2], an unattainable motherhood that devalues what real mothers actually do. The result is frustration and anxiety. Motherhood suffers from a neoliberal intensification that mixes consumerist culture with middle-class imaginaries

Women face pressure on two fronts: pressure to be selfless mothers, as dictated by the patriarchal mantra, and pressure to succeed in the labour market, building a successful career without renouncing having children, as established by the rules of neoliberal capitalism

Feminism and the experience of motherhood

Historically, motherhood and feminism have shared a complex relationship. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s and '70s launched a much needed rebellion against the glorification of motherhood and the sanctity of the nuclear family, in the context of society's conservative sexual morality. Its target was the ideal of sacred motherhood and the patriarchal family model and it demanded sexuality beyond reproduction and the right for women to decide over their own bodies. Major advances were made in contraception and the right to abortion, along with significant sociocultural changes.

However, this rebellion ended in a tense, poorly resolved relationship with motherhood; in some cases denying or disdaining it, in others, even developing a discourse that was anti-reproduction. This should not be that surprising. Motherhood has been used by the patriarchy and capitalism as an instrument for the subjection and control of women, forcing them towards the domestic, private and invisible environment. Motherhood, as an

obligation, has acted as a brake on women's aspirations and as an obstacle to equality and autonomy. Women's liberation meant leaving the home, putting aside childrearing and entering the labour market. By achieving economic independence, it was thought that the problem of motherhood would disappear, and there was no desire for further reflection on the matter. The dilemmas and contradictions of motherhood entangled feminism.

From the mid-1970s, feminism took on the challenge of considering motherhood in a positive light. Once motherhood had been rejected as a destiny, some intellectuals and activists tried to view it from another perspective. The aim was to go beyond the simple negation of motherhood and move the burden of childrearing onto the state or to externalise reproduction. Adrienne Rich's theses in *Of Woman Born* enabled feminists to reconcile themselves with motherhood. Her main contribution was to distinguish between the institution of motherhood that generates submission, as imposed by the patriarchy, and women's potential relationship with the experience of motherhood, establishing a clear distinction between the harm of the former and the virtues of the latter.

In Rich's opinion, it was not a matter of rejecting motherhood, but of rejecting how it was defined, imposed and restricted by the patriarchy, whereby "the idea of maternal power has been domesticated". The "institution of motherhood" needed to be abolished, to place motherhood outside the sphere of the patriarchy. This did not mean "abolishing motherhood", but rather releasing "the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence as any other difficult, but freely chosen work" [3]. Unlike other feminists who identified the reproductive capacity of the female body as a barrier to emancipation, Rich defended women's physicality "as a resource, rather than a destiny" [4]. Women's liberation meant defending and highlighting female sexual, reproductive and maternal potential, as opposed to forced motherhood.

To the rescue

In the context of a crisis of civilisation, motherhood today is experiencing its own crises. We see this in the increasing difficulties women find in getting pregnant, in putting off or even involuntarily renouncing motherhood, the juggling act of balancing childrearing with work, the tensions in their life project, the impossibility of having the number of children they would like, dissatisfaction with the experience of motherhood and self-guilt. These are just some examples of the multiple, invisible and unnamed crises of motherhood. Viewing motherhood from the feminist perspective means rescuing it from its crises and rescuing ourselves from the crisis of motherhood.

But what is feminist motherhood? Mothers have historically been considered objects, not autonomous individuals. Seeing ourselves as independent subjects with our own needs is one of the challenges for feminist reflection on motherhood. A feminist, disobedient mother is one who breaks with the imposed ideals of motherhood, but who does not renounce the experience of motherhood; she defends her role as an active subject with the capacity to

decide; and she reconciles herself with her physicality, empowering herself in pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. As Rich states, this is motherhood outside the law and the institution of motherhood [5], cosa que implica una confrontació constant amb les normes socials establertes.

If we accept the feminist principle that the personal is political, the challenge lies in the emancipatory politicisation of motherhood. It is not a matter of idealising or romanticising it, but rather of recognising its fundamental role in social reproduction and realising its true value. It is high time that we adopted new codes and freed motherhood from the patriarchy. Women won the right not to be mothers, abolishing motherhood as a destiny, now the challenge is to decide how we want to live the experience.

Today's new generation of women and mothers, undoubtedly free of the stereotypes of previous generations, demand visibility and recognition for work that women have been doing for centuries. It is not an offensive by the patriarchy to send us back into the home, as some feminists have suggested [6], sinó de la presa de consciència de com unes pràctiques tan rellevants per a les societats humanes com són gestar, parir, alletar i criar, han estat relegades als marges, i de la necessitat de valorar-les, visibilitzar-les públicament i políticament i reivindicar-ne la responsabilitat col·lectiva, d'homes i dones, en el marc d'un projecte social emancipador.

Communal childrearing

The new decommodified and ecologist feminist motherhoods can be viewed in the context of the debate on the commons and the commonweal. Experiences such as breastfeeding support groups or shared childrearing collectives do not represent a backward step in terms of identity; rather they are defensive projects supporting certain rights and the chance to experience motherhood differently, in the context of the commodification of life and consumerist values, as well as an offensive project to reorganise daily life around other parameters.

Alternative motherhood does not simply mean 'lifestyle politics', i.e. another style of life and motherhood only accessible to the middle and upper classes; rather, it implies highlighting the close links between neoliberalism and motherhood, how the former impedes experience of the latter. It is about gaining changes in the labour market, public services, the family institution and, in short, the model of social reproduction. A different type of motherhood requires a different type of society.

If motherhood is considered a personal decision, then responsibility falls entirely on the individual mother, thus hiding inequalities whereby the experience is perceived very differently depending on the woman's socioeconomic position and ethnicity

Whether we want it to or not, our socioeconomic environment shapes what we can do and restricts our options. We need to avoid establishing an unachievable ideal of motherhood that generates discontent and guilt. Emancipatory motherhoods often share the same space and affinity with initiatives in ecological consumption, non-authoritarian educational models and social and solidarity economy networks, among others, and their strengths and limits are similar to these movements. Above and beyond a personal choice, the challenge lies in placing these proposals in the context of a broader social project of system change.

If motherhood is considered a personal decision, then responsibility falls entirely on the individual mother, thus hiding inequalities whereby the experience is perceived very differently depending on the woman's socioeconomic position and ethnicity. The ambivalence [7], intrinsic to motherhood is deeply shaped by this issue.

Thus, while well-educated, upper and middle-class women frequently discuss how to balance motherhood and their careers and how to incorporate the new role of mother into their own identity, working class women struggle to feed and clothe their children while barely making ends meet and to look after them while trying to hold down highly precarious jobs.

Motherhood is not an individual private practice, however much this message is repeated; it is a public matter, which has political and collective repercussions. From the feminist perspective, it is essential to de-individualise motherhood and emphasise that its difficulties are not just due to gender discrimination but also to the intersection of other oppressions of class and ethnicity. In short, motherhood depends on how social reproduction is organised.

Childrearing and motherhood must be resocialised; they are not private or family affairs [8]. It is not a matter of questioning the care given by a specific mother or father, as our decisions are deeply influenced by a hostile socioeconomic and labour environment, but rather one of discussing which system guarantees the right to care. This is where the main debate on childrearing should lie, although such discussions tend to ignore structural determinants. Another form of care will only be possible in an alternative social model, which implies asking what type of personal relations, labour market, community initiatives and public services we need to make it feasible.

Politics to favour motherhood

Carrying out politics that favour motherhood does not mean legislating to make family and work life compatible, by, for instance, providing longer maternity and paternity leave, but creating the socioeconomic conditions in which people can have children when they want. One of the main reasons why people have fewer and fewer children or have them when they are much older is the increase in work and life precarity. If you cannot make ends meet, if you cannot pay your mortgage or rent, if your job is unstable, then it is difficult to even consider having children.

Rising poverty and precarity mean that Spanish women are the oldest in the world when it comes to having their first child, at 32.1 years of age [9]. In Catalonia, women aged 35 to 39 give birth to more children than those aged 25 to 29 [10]. A world organised around business interests is hostile to life. It is also reckoned that one in four women born in 1975 will not have children, and for most of them this will be because they cannot get pregnant for socioeconomic reasons, lack of a partner (although an increasing number of women are single mothers through choice) or problems of infertility [11].

Carrying out politics that favour motherhood means combating speculation in the housing market, abolishing labour precarity and reducing the length of the working day without cutting wages, so more time can be given to personal and family life. Defending motherhood should be a policy inherent in egalitarian and liberation ideologies, which instead seem to be towed along by conservative and/or liberal sectors, simply identifying motherhood as a burden, in both personal and labour terms.

The real problem is not motherhood, as has been repeatedly pointed out, but a socioeconomic system that is hostile to life. It is not a matter of adapting motherhood to work (as in the case of maternity leave as short as 16 weeks, not even long enough to breastfeed an infant exclusively during the first six months of life, as recommended by all health institutions) but rather of adapting paid work to motherhood and childrearing. I do not intend here to judge mothers who want to return to work once their leave is over; the issue is that someone who wants longer maternity leave should still be guaranteed this right. And this is what all political parties seem to have forgotten. Defending motherhood means defending life, care, bonds and affection, and this must be done from an egalitarian, progressive perspective.

Maternalising fatherhood

The transformations in motherhood, from both the social and personal point of view, have correlations in fatherhood. The father figure, in traditional parental systems, has been defined in relation to that of the mother, but throughout history both functions have been conceived asymmetrically, socially and culturally. While the paternal role has been raised to the category of spiritual principle, bestowing on the man absolute authority over the descendants, the maternal role has been naturalised.

The practice of motherhood, as many feminists demand, should be exercised not just by women, but also by men, and thus no longer be a task for the female gender; this means maternalising fatherhood. As the philosopher Nancy Fraser [12], states, we need to advance towards an egalitarian society, which means “subverting the existing gender division of labor and reducing the salience of gender as a structural principle of social organization”, thus creating equivalent co-responsibility in childcare.

This does not mean fathers and mothers should, or can, do exactly the same things at all stages of childrearing. In the case of biological motherhood in the exterogestation phase, the nine months after childbirth, the work of the mother and father is not the same. We see

this particularly in breastfeeding and skin-to-skin contact just after childbirth, where the mother's role is fundamental. But this does not mean that initial care is exclusively a woman's responsibility. The father can and should be involved in other aspects of childrearing and reproductive work.

If we want a different type of childrearing, we also need to consider a different model of fatherhood, which disobeys the traditional canons and adopts the demands and ideas of feminism, and feminist motherhood activism in particular.

NOTES

- 1 — WOLF, N. *Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood*. Nova York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2003
- 2 — DOUGLAS, S. J.; MICHAELS, M. W. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*. Nova York: Free Press, 2004
- 3 — RICH, A. *Nacemos de mujer. La maternidad cómo experiencia e institución*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2019 (1976), pp. 356.
- 4 — *Ibid*, pp. 84.
- 5 — *Ibid*, pp. 264.
- 6 — BADINTER, E. *La mujer y la madre*. Madrid: La esfera de los libros, 2011.
- 7 — RICH, A., op.cit.; LAZARRE, J., *El nudo materno*. Barcelona: Editorial Las Afueras, 2018 (1976).
- 8 — DEL OLMO, C., *¿Dónde está mi tribu? Maternidad y crianza en una sociedad individualista*. Madrid: Clave Intelectual, 2014.
- 9 — INE. «Movimiento natural de la población (nacimientos, defunciones y matrimonios). Indicadores demográficos básicos año 2017. Datos provisionales» (19 juny 2018) [nota de premsa]
- 10 — IDESCAT. «Estadística de naixements 2017» (27 setembre 2018) [nota de premsa]
- 11 — ESTEVE, A.; DEVOLDER, D.; DOMINGO, A. «La infecundidad en España: tic-tac, tic-tac, tic tac!!!». *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, núm. 1 (2016), p. 1-4.
- 12 — FRASER, N. *Fortunas del feminismo*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2015.



Esther Vivas

Esther Vivas is a journalist. She is focused on maternity, agri-food policies and social movements. She authored several books such as *Mama desobedient. Una mirada feminista a la maternitat* (2019) and *El negocio de la comida. ¿Quién controla nuestra alimentación?* (2014). She regularly appears in TV3, Catalunya Ràdio, TVE, Radio 4 and Betevé as a political and social analyst. She writes at El Periódico newspaper and Opcions magazine. Vivas works as a professor of the Master's Degree on Development and Cooperation at Universitat Ramon Llull and the Master's Degree on Ecological Agriculture at Universitat de Barcelona.