

T rick

Q uestion

During the three months that Alex, my four-year-old daughter, hung around the office to wait for her ride home, she got to know all the women on the staff and memorized where each one sat. Everyday, after coming in from school, she would march around the office to count heads. Last week, she was going through her routine when she found one missing.

"Ma, where's Tita Pi?"

"At home," I said, "Baby's sick." I hoped that the brevity of my answer would communicate to her that I was in no mood to talk. But like most four-year-olds, Alex is dense.

"Why doesn't her husband stay home to take care of the baby instead?"

Whoa. My hand froze in the air above the keyboard and my back straightened from being bent forward at the computer monitor. "Heeey," I patted myself on the back, "you must be doing something right here." I was swelling with pride. Imagine, four years old and already a feminist. And then, me and my big mouth, we made a mistake.

I swung my swivel chair around to face my daughter. I was eager to converse now. "You see, Alex," I started, "it is a mother's instinct to care for her sick child." I paused to put some drama when Alex jabbed with her punchline: "How come you don't?"

For days, I mulled over what my daughter had said. On the one hand, I am glad that Alex possesses none of the stereotype images of women. But, on the other, I was pained by my daughter's indictment.

Thinking about that afternoon in the

office brought to mind the dilemmas that feminists face in real life, especially those that tear women between passion for work and passion for family. The concept of parenting changes because circumstances force a redefinition.

This process of redefinition make women, and sometimes even their children, odd if not totally bad in the eyes of conservatives who have made it their life's mission to uphold and protect "traditional family values." My problem with these values is that they shut out the possibility of restructuring hierarchical patterns into consensual arrangements. Traditional family values obligate members to become artificially close instead of making closeness spontaneous.

The guardians of morality accuse women who choose to redefine their roles of irresponsibility and of being parents of convenience. These guardians can never imagine how the process is at once a huge responsibility, totally scary and absolutely exhausting. Made more so by the prevailing culture which does not reinforce the new values and ethics that women now want to pass on to their children. Women have made headway in redefining motherhood but the backlash of conservatism keeps their goals difficult.

Yet women continue to take on the challenge of changing the structures because, yes, women have finally learned to be "selfish." But this act of "selfishness" causes no little distress in women. After all, they have been reared to serve others and conditioned to have a higher capacity for self-sacrifice.

Women have a lot of resources at their disposal. Day-care centres and creches for working mothers could be set up at low cost to generate funds by women's groups. Vocational training centres could be set up where young girls who cannot continue their education for one reason or another are taught skills of trade by more experienced women in order to make a living: basket making, tailoring, cloth weaving and many other such skills.

Women's groups could also set up business centres that provide typing pools, photocopying services and, if affordable, computer services, telephone and fax services for a fee. In Nigeria, such business centres are good sources of funds, especially in university campuses and tertiary institutions. If individuals cannot sponsor these ventures, women's groups themselves can start something. Even summer programmes can help. For example, the Nigerian Association of University Women (NAUW), Ibadan chapter, organized a four-week summer program to teach adolescents how to make *adire*, a native tie-and-dye done on cloth, that yielded funds. So, women's groups should get up and go. The sky is the limit!

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We should not rely solely on donor-based funding. Self-respecting women do not have

↳ Editorial, from p.1

These values of self-sacrifice and service to others are pounded hard into women. In turn, they pound these values into their daughters. It is about time, however, for women to pound as hard on the values of individuality and self-actualization. And no pounding can be as good as self-example.

All the blood and sweat that went into the struggle for women's rights has reaped rewards. Women and their daughters can now be better educated, can now have better health and social services, can now have more economic power. Of course, accessing these opportunities is another story. And of course, the thing to do now is to translate these opportunities into political power, which means women making the choices available for themselves—whether in the spheres of politics, economics or parenting.

That afternoon in the office, when my daughter asked why I was not always around to nurse her wound or break her fall, she did not mean to say that it was a problem or that she suddenly saw me as a failure. Alex and I, we are both proud of what she can do by herself as a four-year-old. Having gained this measure of independence, I do not think that she will want to or that it is good for her to backslide.

But I did. I backslid. When I told my daughter that mothers are caring and nurturing, I forgot to also tell her that mothers should be allowed to choose how they wish to care and nurture, because usually they care and nurture best when they have that freedom. ♪

Jan Mercado Camero

the begging mentality. As a matter of fact, we should encourage women to be self-sufficient and self-reliant.

It would be a better world if beggars of any kind disappeared from the face of the earth.

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WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Can men be feminists? Yes? No? Why?

Let's talk. Speak your thoughts. Write to Feedback.

If you have questions you wish to raise, send them to us also and let's ask our readers:

"What do you think?"