

# Oppressive Traditions Must Be Challenged in the Home First

By Kumari Kimendhri Pillay

**M**ost children simply are not empowered enough to make others around them—especially their parents and other adults—aware of their innermost feelings. This is often due to fear of being hit or shouted at with ugly words that tend to leave lasting negative impressions, such that these children know not to speak of their emotions to these adults (and others) ever again.

(and even now) for some reason I loved the colour blue and was disgusted at the colour pink. I did not feel comfortable but was afraid to tell my mother. I thus had to endure years of having a room with a pink colour scheme. Did she decide this colour scheme on her own just to annoy me or show me who is boss? Absolutely not; Mum was merely adhering to a “timeless” tradition that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. Thus

The above example of colour preference requires further unpacking. Another reason why Mother did not ask me for my colour preference was also probably due to my being female; had I been male she would have to some extent consulted me about the colour scheme of my room. In fact, she admitted that had I been a boy, she would have been so happy (perhaps happy enough to let me choose my own colour scheme?). For

have had a good excuse not to be domestically inclined had I been a boy.

According to Marxist theory, as soon as a thesis is created an antithesis already exists even without it being articulated. True enough, I soon began to feel discomfort over this gender inequity issue at home. My parents may not have realised it at that time but I started to dislike my circumstances, and in my misery I attempted to find an alternative view of the gender issue. This led me to hope and believe that gender equity was obtainable but still I was uncertain about how to make it a reality.

I think that gender equity should begin in the private space of the home. Attempting to initiate gender equity in the public sphere such as the work place is a mission that could encounter many difficulties, as existing mindsets may be unchangeable.

One could argue that gender equity in the home should be the equally shared responsibility of both parents. In a patriarchal society (like most societies) it is often the women who are chiefly responsible for child rearing. While insisting that their husbands play a more active role in child

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Poststructural theorist Michael Foucault claims that we are never without power. We may be able to apply this theory to women who could lobby for their own rights but with children this theory appears steadily unsteady. As a little girl

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his part, my dad reinforced this by welcoming my “boyish” habits and taking great interest in my karate and sporting activities that eventually faded as I grew up and suddenly sought to be more “feminine”. He also once remarked that I would

rearing, and even forcing them to do it, women should also consider that being principally responsible for child care could be an opportunity for them to inculcate gender equity right at the start. Maybe the problem is that women often unwittingly succumb to traditional methods of rearing their children, which includes instilling in them gender inequity belief systems. Women thus need to begin such a process of positively transforming their families by questioning their own belief systems and the amount of gender inequity it contains. They should then attempt to rectify any gender inequity at home by a slow and deliberate process making the family understand why there is change as well as the need for it.

As an alternative to what some children would call boring lectures from their parents, the parent or mother could merely make subtle changes in the home as well as in the manner in which the family is governed politically. These might include the recognition that sons and daughters enjoy equal status and rights, bearing in mind however that age groups should be differentiated (for instance, a 13-year-old boy should definitely not have all the same rights as his 5-year-old sister and vice versa).

Another situation that definitely poses a problem is when the mother accords the father a higher status than the children (and her-

self) and treats him accordingly. This immediately sets the pattern of gender inequity in the family, encouraging the children to believe that the male position in a household is higher and more rewarding than a female position. Sometimes it is the mother who punishes or shouts at her children when they question statements or actions by their father that have to do with gender imbalances (or balances).

Unfortunately, growing up in apartheid South Africa did not encourage one to acknowledge similarities and equity amongst people. Instead, apartheid promoted differences and inequity. Apartheid was premised on the belief that we are different from the others (due to the various racial groups in the country) and should thus acknowledge these differences ourselves, no doubt with the government's assistance. This celebration of difference also emphasised other differences such as that between genders. These social structures undoubtedly supported the status quo like most social structures in the world and are often promoted by their own governments.

Another concern of alternative parenting is to know and if possible watch the television programmes that your child watches. I was not really a fan of the soap series *Loving*, but I remember watching it ardently as that was the programme that was watched in almost every home, including ours,

when I was a little girl. I eventually began to hate soap operas after I questioned myself about the type of programmes I really wanted to watch. Children could be viewing unhealthy programmes that promote gender inequity thus allowing it into your home even without your help. Sometimes the television role models the children look up to are sexist characters, whether domineering men or submissive women. Rather than prevent the children from watching these programmes, parents should initiate informal discussions about these characters and promote a critical attitude in the children when viewing television.

By all means steer your children away from beauty pageants or baby competitions. Many mothers like to enter their daughters into these pageants, which can have negative effects on the latter. The children could become competitive first about their looks, later advancing to other aspects and levels of competitiveness. They soon become excessively self-conscious and always looking for approval about their looks from others.

Being of Indian origin also proved to be somewhat of a traumatising experience for me. Traditional Indian culture holds that a woman's beauty lies in her hair that was to be preferably long and straight. As a young girl I felt so inferior due to my curly, frizzy hair and our mother's insistence that my sister and I keep our

hair very short. My only option at that time was to begin to grow my hair as soon as I could maintain it myself. I grew my hair long and even learned how to straighten it with a hair dryer during my early teens. Years later I realised that I really prefer short hair as it is more manageable and better suited to my lifestyle and features even though my tradition states otherwise. It is the parent's duty to unpack these restrictive traditions, as it could result in greater spiritual freedom for their children.

Children thus need to be freed from such traditions that promote gender inequity. There is hope, and no doubt an absolute need, not only for feminist parents but all parents world-wide to initiate a process of alternative parenting that will create adults who will in turn practice healthy alternative parenting without much effort. ☺

*Kumari Kimendhri Pillay was born in 1979 in Durban, South Africa and grew up "in the heat of the oppressive apartheid system." Of Indian origin, she is a graduate of Indian classical dance, Bharata Natyam, hence the title "Kumari." She obtained her BA Music degree as well as her Honours in Contemporary Dance and Choreography at the University of Natal-Durban. While working as a researcher, she is currently studying for a masteral degree in Education and Community Development also at the same university.*