The Right of Women: Single Mothers by Choice
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The 1970s and the feminist movement created a new American woman. Women could forego their maternal duties and lose the June Cleaver act in lieu of the fulfillment of finding success in the business world. The problem for women who choose careers over marriage and children is that they often, though not always, never find the balance of working and having a family. Unfortunately, many women find difficulties marrying after they have put their love lives on hold for their education and career. Some women can part with the idea of having a husband; however, others cannot bear the thought that they may not be mothers. This paper examines the ways, reasons, obstacles, and triumphs of single women who become single mothers by choice and serves as a defense for these women to have that right.

Most girls today are raised with the ideals instilled within them that they are capable of accomplishing whatever they wish as the workplace has opened up considerably for women in the past thirty years. Women have the same opportunity as men in education and the job force. “By integrating both workplaces and educational institutions across the social spectrum, women could achieve parity with men in the economic sphere,” (Hertz 7). Women are running corporate offices, serving in government positions, going into space, and serving as Federal judges. The equality women searched for has been, for the most part, found.

The problem with these new opportunities is that “[d]espite cultural chatter about all the problems women have in combining work and child rearing, women still believe they can have it all,” (Trimberger 147). Women thought, and to a degree still think, they could forestall children and marriage until they have established themselves in a career. Unfortunately, that simply isn’t reality. Women who wait until they are in their thirties are less likely to marry and have children then women in their twenties (Trimberger). In addition, many women spend so much time on the career that by the time they start looking around to start a family, it’s too late for them (Trimberger).

Those women who are not living in an idealistic world of a career and motherhood feel they must make a choice. “Middle-class women…are caught between a battered but resilient ideology of marriage-then-motherhood and the experience of independence and self-fulfillment in a work-place that poses fewer barriers to women than previously,” (Hertz 3). For women, the choice is hazy. Ambitious women feel the contradicting forces within them: the feeling that they want to take advantage of equal opportunity versus the call of motherhood and homemaking.

This is not all women, however. Some women are content to be a homemaker as they are satisfied with their role of bringing up the next generation. On the other hand, it would appear that some women do not have the mothering gene at all. Their goals are based solely in the business realm. Neither type of women is more/less feminine than any other kind. This paper, however, will be focused more on the women who fall between these extremes: the middle class woman who chose her career and now wants to become a mother on her own.

Women who chose their career initially and then decide they want children are not alone. “Eighteen percent of women aged forty to forty-four had never had a child” (Trimberger pg 147). Becoming a single mother by choice is a frightening and often expensive endeavor. Many obstacles stand in the way, including the idea that they will mother alone. “Single women’s acceptance of their childlessness can be attributed both to the cultural primacy of the idea that being coupled is the major source of happiness,” (Trimberger 149). Women are, in essence, afraid to have a child without a man to join them. “Only in their thirties do single women struggle with whether they want to mother, and if so, whether they can do it without a partner,” (Trimberger pg 147). For some women, the fact that they are single makes them never want to raise children. In addition, “[w]omen over forty who say they would have liked to have children did not reflect on their past actions or think of new ways of becoming mothers,” (Trimberger pg 147). It has been considered for a very long time to be a cultural taboo to have children alone and without the help of a man. Other obstacles include price tag and the time and effort it takes. But for the women who choose this path, all sacrifices are worth it (Hertz).

The first option most women choose to become mothers alone is sperm donation/in vitro fertilization. Usually, “…single women opt for sperm donation when they do not have or want male partners,” (Weissenberg 2784-2785). In vitro fertilization is expensive, however, and there is no guarantee of the process working (Weissenberg). There are also the difficult questions mothers must face as their child is growing up. Mothers often know little about the sperm donor, and even the rare few that know the name of their child’s biological father, the man usually has no contact (Hertz). Women who chose sperm donors “knew that biological fathers would not only be uninvolved in parenting but remain unknown,” (Trimberger 171). Women are also mindful of the fact that their sperm donor may also have sired other children, creating half siblings for her child. These facts complicate family trees and genetic lines (Hertz). Women must keep these facts in mind if they are healthy enough and fertile enough to undergo this procedure; however, to many women the lack of knowledge on the father was a blessing, not a curse. Mystery traits in the child were attributed to the unknown father (Trimberger). If the father is known, many times the child can meet the father under much friendlier and easier terms than they would under adoption terms or a child reunited with a father who abandoned/divorced the mother (Trimberger).

Unfortunately, many women, by the time they make the decision to become a single mother, are too old to undergo the procedures involved with in vitro fertilization (Hertz). So, adoption is the second option for these single women. Fifty years ago, single mothers could never expect to adopt children, but “in the last 20 years there has been a steady, sizable
increase in the number of single parent adoptions—some people feel that it’s the fastest growing trend in the field,” (“Single Parent Adoption: What You Need to Know.” 1). Women turn to foreign and domestic adoption in order to become a mother. Though adoptions can be long and expensive, single women have the drive needed in order to see it through (Dougherty).

“When asked their motivation for adoption, almost all the women (95.1%) cited reasons related to the fulfillment of their own needs,” (Dougherty 312). Though it is not their biological child, single mothers who chose adoption are able to fulfill their maternal needs.

Once women adopt/give birth to a child, the road of single motherhood isn’t very easy. One of the biggest adversaries to women who chose single motherhood is the lingering conservative social views that a woman needs a man in order to raise a child. Several individuals believe that women should never leave the home and enter into the workforce at all. Pope John Paul stated in a papal release that the “…the true advancement of women requires the clear recognition be given to the value of the maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and other professions,” (Pope John Paul III 121). Many Christian factions hold this ideal to be true, and believe that these empowered women who work outside the home are going against the will of God. The church is gracious to those who are widowed or impoverished so a mother must go to work, but women who chose this lifestyle are considered a social taboo (Pope John Paul III). There is also the belief that “…society must be structured in such a way that wives and women are not in practice compelled to work outside the home,” (Pope John Paul III 121). Such a society that works in the opposite way is considered to be carrying out the wrong actions. Luckily, these ideals are not the social norm but a minority. Most women who chose the path of single motherhood are independent and strong willed enough to look beyond these antiquated traditions.

There is also the problem that people have with In vitro Fertilization. In vitro Fertilization has been a controversial issue since its conception, often tied to homosexual couples and leading to surrogate mothers who make money birthing someone else’s child. An organization called ALL speaks particularly against in vitro fertilization. The organization claims that “[n]one has a right to a child.” (ALL: In Vitro Fertilization Undermines Human Dignity 1). There are also strong claims that “In vitro fertilization is wrong because it separates human procreation from conjugal union. In the process, couples make themselves masters of life instead of stewards.” (ALL: In Vitro Fertilization Undermines Human Dignity 1). The problem they see with in vitro fertilization is that it is tampering with the plan God has for people’s lives. Again, as in the Catholic view afore mentioned, these opinions are a minority and luckily most women are strong enough to withstand the criticism they may receive.

One of the biggest problems single mothers face is discrimination. “Even the term single mother is pejorative, since we seldom speak of a married mother,” (Trimberger 169). Single mothers who chose to be usually have sturdy careers and are financially stable, but once they have their children the businesses they work for rarely extend benefits to these new mothers. “The United States is the only industrialized country that doesn’t have paid leave other than Australia. A full 163 countries give women paid leave with the birth of a child,” (Blades 3). More specifically, once the mothers are on their feet and their child grows older, “…scores of states…do not have employment laws that protect mothers,” (Blades 4). Mothers are on their own with their children and single mothers are even more vulnerable without a husband to protect them financially. Women should be able to protect themselves and the state should most assuredly aid these mothers who’ve proven they have what it takes to raise a child. In addition, if a mother who once had a stable career loses her job she is less likely to get rehired elsewhere because she has a child. “Recent Cornell University research...confirms what many women are finding: Mothers are 44 percent less likely to be hired than nonmothers who have the same resume, experience, and starting pay; and mothers are offered significantly lower starting pay,” (Blades 5). This research is disheartening to people who have children alone, though the United States is a country founded on equal opportunity and acceptance of all types of people and family structures. With the increasing number of single-mother headed household and pressure on the government, single mothers should remain optimistic that the government will become more supportive of the ones who raise the next generation.

In conjunction with discrimination of the mother, there is also the fear mothers harbor for their children raised by a single mother. “The general tendency is that children of single parents do worse than others at a great many things. These differences range from their being more likely to commit a crime or having a substance abuse problem, to having lower grades in math and being less likely to go to college,” (Baumeister 2). These fears are often not enough to sway a mother’s opinion, but additional research says that companies are less likely to hire children of a single parent because “…companies want to discriminate on the presumption that two parents are better than one,” (Baumeister 4). Though the previous evidence was convincing, one cannot throw out the fact that the majority of single mothers are teens without college education (Johnson). The ones who chose to be single on their own are often not considered in this same income bracket. That does not mean the discrimination will not be a problem to them, but as afore mentioned, as single mothers become a more numerous, pressure on companies and a call for government programs should pacify these fears.

The previous issues facing a woman about to make the leap into single motherhood are frightening enough, but take into account doing it alone without a husband. Women who raise children are to serve as both the male and female figure in that child’s life. In addition, a unit of two or three with only one of those being an adult is a scarily vulnerable family unit. “In addition to inherent difficulties of parenting, all of us….were subject to the increasingly strident cultural message that our children, growing up without an in-house father, would be disadvantaged and damaged,” (Trimberger 169). This kind of news is hard on anyone to deal with when they embark on the treacherous road of single motherhood. Single motherhood is difficult enough, but it got more difficult “[i]n 1992, [when] then-vice president Dan Quayle attacked TV character Murphy
Brown's decision to bear a child out of wedlock and to raise her son as a single mother," (Trimberger 187). Single mothers, following the vice-president's words, were attacked. "By 1996, a Gallup Poll had found that 79% of a national sample of adults in the United States agreed with the statement ‘the most significant family or social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home," (Trimberger 187). Imagine the issues that unraveled for women who chose to have children alone, compared with the research that “[m]ental health experts say that the ‘ideal’ is to place a child in a two parent home with a mother and a father who are compatible and loving,” (Single Parent Adoption: What You Need to Know.”) With facts like these, its daunting to a woman to choose such a life for fear that her children will not fare as well as a child with two parents.

Luckily, there is emerging evidence that says women do not need a man to raise a well-rounded child. It has been found that “…children’s social and emotional development was not found to be negatively affected by the absence of a father in a study of fatherless families from infancy,” (Weissenberg 2785). Of course, there is the fear among the male population that a boy who is raised by a single mother will not be as “manly” as boys who have a male figure present in the home. An adversary to such a belief, Peggy Drexler, states that “…boys are hardwired to be boys. Masculinity is innate,” (France 3). As for the athletes in boys, Drexler also says that mothers can do an adequate job at showing both their male and female children how to play sports and maintain an active lifestyle, whereas fathers have a tendency to favor boys when it comes to such activities (France). “In short, parenting is either good or deficient, not male or female,” (France 2), and mothers should not fear raising their children on their own.

The last piece, beyond social pressure, discrimination of mother and child, and lack of a father figure is the mother's income level. “Relative risks of poverty for women are particularly critical, given the growing number of female-headed households in the U.S. The percentage of single females grew from 34 in 1950, to 38 in 1970, to 43 in 1990, and finally to 46 in 2002,” (Yamokoski 168). As can be seen, the number of single mothers is rising. Compare this to the monetary rate never-married women have to married women. “Never-married childless women have a median net worth of US$23,000 compared to US$1,000 for never-married women with children,” (Yamokoski 180). The difference in this income is large and frightening. It is a shame when a government system does little to protect the mothers in its country. In fact, “…the government does little to create public policies that support mothers in the workplace or in the home, a negligence further contributing to the pauperization of motherhood,” (Yamokoski 173). This combined with fear of discrimination and financial issues can be frightening to a woman.

Just as the facts concerning the well being of a child had to be taken into context, so it also must be considered with this. The majority of single mothers are those who have children in their teens (Johnson); therefore, the data is slightly skewed. Mothers should not fear when considering single motherhood because the ones that have the money for it are likely to stay stable through the upbringing of their child’s life. For mothers who adopt, they should keep in mind that “[t]he issue of personal finances has become less important with the availability of adoption subsidies in almost every State,” (Single Parent Adoption: What You Need to Know.” 2). In addition, women are doing much better in the job force then we have been led to believe. “By 2002, women occupied 48 percent of full-time wage and salary positions within the executive, administrative, and managerial occupations…As a result, the gender gap has decreased considerably in recent decades.” (Yamokoski 171). Women are more stable and hard working then they give themselves credit for. For a mother determined to raise a child, she deserves the chance and the right to bring and raise a child in this world.

Finally, there are so many rewards when it comes to being a single mother. “Single motherhood also foster[s] an intimacy that was very satisfying. It [gives single mothers] an outlet for love, sharing, and care that [they do not] find at work, with friends, or in adult relationships,” (Trimberger 182). Motherhood is a gift and should be embraced by all able bodied women who want a child to love and to raise. Women who have been so motivated and successful in their career can exhibit those same good traits in their mothering endeavors and no one should stand in their way.

It is time for the discrimination and judgment directed towards single mothers who chose that life to come to a close. These women have proven themselves capable of setting up a life for themselves. Logic points out that if they can sustain themselves, they can support a child. Through all the various ways that women become single mothers and all the different obstacles they face, the main focus of society in regards to these women should be honor and respect as they raise up the next age of American citizens.

Works Cited


