

# **ON OUR OWN TERMS: JOURNEYS WITH OUR MOTHERS\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This is the story of six middle-class women in their forties introspecting on their lives and their relationships with their mothers. Their stories are analyzed for their insights into how these women and their mothers coped with the realities and demands of patriarchy. The researcher participates as one of the subjects, responds to the same questions put forth to the rest, and writes her own story. She then interviews the other subjects and writes down their stories, and analyzes the findings by bringing to bear her own experiences and understanding as a student of feminism, and one who is seeking some answers to her own personal journey and evolution as a feminist. Probing into how other women of her own generation and class who do not call themselves feminists, look at the issue of feminism, she also wanted to share with them the experience of participating in feminist research and convince them that each woman's voice and story deserves to be heard.

The researcher sifts through the stories and comes up with some common themes and patterns. Although the major events and the major dilemmas of these women revolve around the

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family, their frustrations are mostly career-related. Although they do not claim to be feminists, their definitions of feminism are fairly accurate, touching on their rights as women, the equality between the sexes and being able to pursue self-fulfillment. Most of the complaints about their femaleness center on the unfairness of being saddled with the burden of domesticity.

Whether positive or negative, the subjects acknowledge the strong influence of their mothers on their lives. However, all the subjects consider themselves to be different from their mothers. There is no clear trend in terms of the influence of the mothers as role models for the subjects. All the subjects regard their mothers with ambivalence, with not one expressing unequivocal love or hatred for their mothers. All the mother-daughter relationships documented in the study show an improvement with the passage of time.

All the life stories show that the subjects suffered from some form of patriarchal conditions whether as daughters or as wives. In coping with these realities, the subjects were putting into action a feminist perspective although they did not label it as such. The subjects all manifest what the researcher terms as an incipient brand of feminism, which if nurtured, could make the transition from the unconscious to the conscious kind. The family and career emerge as the two areas which the subjects deem as important in the assertion of their rights. The home proves to be the turf where most of them achieved some measure of success in being able to exert their own influence. Their careers are the source of their frustrations, with most of them, except for one, wanting to have charted their career development with more planning and resolve. Two of them waged particularly difficult struggles in terms of supplanting or supplementing the role of main breadwinner which their husbands abdicated.

A “split-level” feminism is seen to occur first in the divergence between speech and action where some are able to articulate very well what feminism is but has a difficult time translating their assertiveness into action, while others who purport not to be aware of feminism as a concept or guidepost in their lives in fact demonstrate very feminist inclinations in their behavior and decisions. Another split occurs between home and work, where some express their assertiveness only in one area but not in the other. The study points out that the subjects, being more privileged, may be more difficult to convince regarding the need for a feminist perspective in their own lives. They need only to make the connection between patriarchy and the sources of their oppression, and feminism and the options open to them for coping with the patriarchal world. It is one of the tasks of feminist research to help women see the connection in clearer, more concrete, more familiar terms.