

Old-fashioned ideas are the new

CULTURE

The conflict around gender roles is still vigorous, and the stereotypes are alive and kicking, writes **Heidi Kingstone**

It's always best to blame your mother. Blame her for everything, but particularly for your failure, any crimes you may have committed, your incompetence, your unhappiness, failed marriage and general misery. Freud popularised it, so why not simply continue? That theory was popular even before women started to work. Now that women work and have children, mothers are blamed equally for working and not working, for having children and not having children, and certainly for working and having children. See how much fun this is.

Over the years, the argument has swung from whether women could have it all, to an acknowledgment that they couldn't, to the present debate, which centres around how women can find a balance to working and being good mothers.

What has also changed is how child-centric society has become. This has fuelled the endless arguments about how children should best be brought up.

It is reflected in the different policies that different countries have adopted, and because no one really knows, and the analysis debates are in flux, women can never win. Once children were to be seen and not heard. Those were the good old days.

Now they are centre stage, with parents often acting like serfs in the pursuit of giving their children everything they could want.

Ambitious, often frustrated, mothers still live their lives through their children, and they want to make sure their kids win in those high gambling stakes. They take them to fencing and piano and ballet. It's stage mother syndrome writ large.

Not only do you have to give your children strange names, like Apple and Brooklyn, in the hope that they will find some individuality in the commercial swirl of global uniformity, but you must parade them as the 2006 accessory of choice. All this to prove you have proper eco-credentials, and are in tune with the planet and the suffering of people everywhere. Just not in your hood.

Singer Gwen Stefani, looking glam as ever at the *Casino Royale* premiere in London recently, was seen clutching something to her neck – it turned out to be her baby.

Britain, as usual, is quite schizophrenic about what women should do. The super-rich have fed into the belief that mothers should stay at home and not work.

These yummy mummies look down on other mothers, who, either out of need or want, have jobs. Take Fionnuala, for example. She's an Irish-born physicist who

lives in north London with her husband, three children – one a newborn baby – and has a high-powered job in international publishing. She also has a truculent, not very new age husband who doesn't want to be woken up by screaming babies. "Whether you stay at home or work are such emotive issues anyway as mothers feel pulled in both directions, and finally, it is a personal choice," says Fionnuala.

The insanity of these suppressed over-ambitious stay-at-home moms is manifest in their philosophy of superiority. And the men who support these new stay-at-home moms often earn in excess of R14-million a year. Instead of a career, their wives jog, play tennis, have nannies and/or fool around in businesses their husbands have bought for them.

In 2003 Clare Mulley left work to have her second daughter. After six months she officially became a bad mother, choosing to hire a part-time child-minder to look after the baby, while her older daughter, then 2-and-a-half, went to nursery school.

"My misdemeanour was not returning to work," says Mulley, biographer of Eglantyne Jebb, the co-founder of Save the Children and champion of children's human rights.

"This, I think, would have been understood from financial motives, but choosing to spend time away from my children to focus on an unpaid project, for fun, was not. Since I was lucky enough not to have to return to work, I felt it was very much expected that I should revel in full-time motherhood."

Instead she started to research a biography of Eglantyne Jebb, the co-founder of Save the Children, where she had previously worked, and also started an MA in social history to support this research.

"Eglantyne herself never had children and remained committed to Save the Children from its launch to the end of her admittedly short life. The irony of choosing to escape from some of my own childcare responsibilities to research the

development of Eglantyne's child welfare focus was not lost on me, but the hostility I faced from some of the other local mums astonished me.

"I love my children immeasurably, but one of the ideas I would like to give them is the knowledge that they can live their lives for themselves as well as for others, however much they love them," says Mulley. In Sarah Tucker's new book, *The Playground Mafia*, she says "the Mafia Mums do the school run in four-wheel-drive cars, new Minis or second-hand Golf GTIs. They wear Jaeger and ask lots of leading questions about everyone else's wellbeing, but don't provide any information about themselves unless it makes other mothers feel inferior in some way."

In France, the situation couldn't be more different. There, working mothers are positively encouraged and revered. Women are paid huge bonuses if they have a third child and are given significant maternity leave and subsidies.

Some argue that the French promote working women because these women are "Frenchified" at a time when France is engulfed in a series of internal debates about race. Nancy is a Canadian woman married to a Frenchman. She lives in Paris and works in international TV news. The burning issue for her is to find balance.

"It's your choice to work," she acknowledges, "but how do you do that and make your children a priority? You have to sacrifice yourself. I live for my bath at the end of the day. Everybody knows I am not to be disturbed. Ever. If only for that short period of time."

Hugely successful, with a string of awards to her credit, Nancy wishes she had known how important the first five years of a child's development were. "I wish I had been around more, but most of us don't realise this until those years have passed."

In Germany, after Angela Merkel became the country's first female chancellor, she appointed Ursula von der Leyen as minister of families, with a brief to get women into the workforce.

Women who do anything other than stay home with children are considered cruel and unnatural. They even have a name – *rabennutter* – literally a raven-mother, named after the bird that pushes her chicks out of the nest.

It's no surprise then that Germany has the lowest female-participation rate in the workforce in western Europe. In an attempt to counter this, Von der Leyen introduced a bill that pays mothers – or fathers – for a full year of maternity leave if they agree to go back to work, and encourages employers to take them back.

Old-fashioned ideas, not really part of the mainstream, are still "embedded in the neurons of our brains", says Reiner Klingholz, head of the Berlin Institute for Population and Development. Despite the fact that nine out of 10 women would prefer to return to work after having children, few do.

Somewhere out there in the ether is the formula for balance and the answer to the eternal question of what is right for women and men and children besides just blaming your mother. But for now that will have to do.

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The new woman has the best of all worlds

Samantha Cowen

When I was 9 years old my father went away on a business trip. Before he left, he told my younger brother Nick, who was about 6 at the time, to "be the man of the house and look after your mother while I'm gone".

At the time, the words had no significance to me. Everyone knew that men go to work and earn money, and women stay home, have babies and look after everyone and everything in the home. It was a clear-cut, easy-to-read division of labour.

It never occurred to me at the time that expecting a 6-year-old to take care of a thirty-something intelligent woman who had a driving licence and the power to vote was in any way an abnormal or ambitious request.

After all, I spent my school years studying hard, but safe in the instinctive knowledge in the back of my mind that if it all went wrong, I could just get married. Some man would take care of the bills and I would learn to cook, graduate magna cum laude from duster and polish school, and pick my 2.4 kids up in an air-conditioned station wagon.

That's because when I was little there were clearly defined checklists for the respective genders.

For women, it was how clean your house was; what schools your kids were at; whether your waist was as small as on your wedding day; whether there was always cake in the tin; how active you were on church or school committees; whether you could make a roast chicken last three meals – and you never exceeded your housekeeping allowance. For men it was salary; perhaps a new car every year; making senior management; how your son performed on the rugby field; a golf handicap.

As kids, my brothers and I watched and learnt.

Big boys don't cry, whether they're 3 or 33. Girls don't get dirty. Barbie dolls vs BB guns. The list was endless. Boys and girls were brought up differently, and that's how it was.

Twenty years on, we've moved away from those norms. They're not the norm any more. There are far more working mothers, whose traditional values have changed. Like me.

I always knew I wanted to work, to have a career; to buy five pairs of black shoes at a time because I felt like it, despite what the monthly budget might be. I wanted to be valued for my creativity and vision, not my Victoria sponge. I wanted my own money, the independence I never saw my mother exercise. On the other hand, I always wanted children, and to be home with them.

To my own surprise, I enjoy the hours spent building railways and making fish fingers with and for my son. My second child (a girl) has just been born and I'm taking four months of paid leave to have and nurture her, while spending time at home with my 3-year-old.

We will lie in front of gentle TV shows like *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Andy Pandy*. We will go for long, sunny walks in the pram. It will be a long, hot summer of family love.

And my husband, the partner in that miracle, got just three days of paternity leave. Fair? I don't think so, and nor does he.

The fact is, men are in a bit of a no-man's land – excuse the pun. They are battling to find new definitions of power and success. They are now pitted against each other and us in the workplace. It is difficult. It calls for new boundaries, new vision and new value systems. As does bringing up a son.

Our life as a family is better because I have a job. I work half-day for a full-time salary, which enables me to pay someone to clean up and keep the house tidy – two things I detest – so the time I am at home with the children I actually get to spend with them. They're far more exciting than the vacuum cleaner.

I am affirmed and fulfilled by my job, and don't need to live vicariously through my children. I take joy in their achievements but recognise that they are their achievements. I hope they look at their dad and me and realise that whether you're the breadwinner or the breadmaker, at the end of the day, it's still bread. And we all eat it.

So what is my role in this ever-shifting environment? Well, first of all, my son Chris needs some yardsticks. I don't expect him to look after me when Martin goes away on business. I do expect him to be truthful and polite. As the mother of a daughter, I want her to know she can be whatever she wants to be. And as the mother of a son, I want him to know that it's okay to feel, be it bad, sad, glad or mad. Being a boy doesn't preclude your feeling love or pain. Every night we sit and talk about his day. At this

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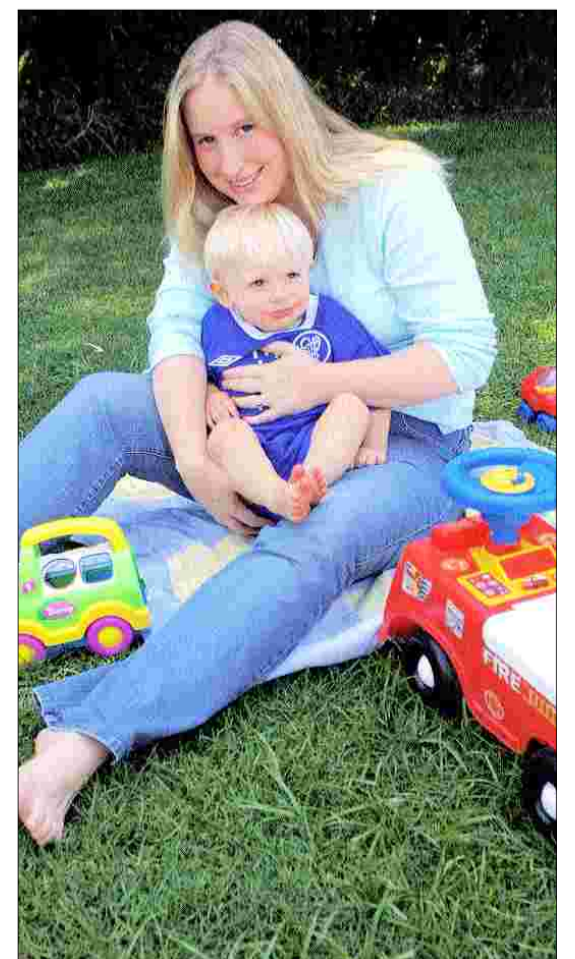
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age, he is still comfortable about telling me those things. I watch Chris at the age of 3 unencumbered by the burden of the need to be the tough guy Long may that last. Being honest about your feelings is the only way of developing personal integrity and a sense of self. Having conversations about your feelings is no longer just the province of mothers and daughters. In opening those channels of communication he is going to be confident about discussing feelings in a world that still expects men to be the strong silent type. Men need to learn to live in their hearts as well as their heads.

As his mother, I want him to see that women can be nurturing caregivers whether or not they bake, and that men are instinctive caretakers whatever they earn. I want him to have God in his life. God doesn't care how much you earn, although He values how hard you work. That men and women need to value each other equitably, not equally; that our differences often make our relationships stronger. And that any porn he collects in his teens should stay hidden under the bed, away from my eyes. I know you read it but I don't want to know about it.

Sam Cowen is a presenter on *The Rude Awakening* on 94.7 Highveld Stereo.



Sam Cowen with her son Christopher. Photograph: Bathini Mbatha