

Our Mothers' Daughters

Judith Arcana

Among those women who did wish for daughters, who could, without ambivalence, state that they did prefer to have female children, there were several variations among their motives. Most common were those women who related their sexual identity and life experience, both positive and negative, to their wish for a daughter.

I wanted a girl when I had Mandy. My mother wanted girls, and I somehow thought it would be nice to have a little girl. My husband probably would have preferred to have a boy.

You know the old ladies who feel your stomach and tell you what sex your baby will be? They all told me I was going to have a boy. I was really huge. When I went into labor, I was very scared; I wished I had never become pregnant, and I began thinking about my mother, and how I wished she could comfort me then. I thought of how close we were, and that's what I would want for my child — for us to be real close. I knew I couldn't be that close to a boy, be buddies and friends and do everything together. I wished 'Please let me have a girl; please let me have a girl.' When I saw her I was so happy; I feel real

close to her now; I would like to have six daughters.

I want a daughter. I want to be the mother that I never had. To the daughter I never was. That's what I want. I want a sister.

I wanted girls. It was sort of a gut thing. I was saying to people with the first one that I wanted a girl, but it was a boy. Well, that was fine, but then I had Frederick and it was a boy again, and I was disappointed, but of course, I finally accepted him. There was some stuff that went on when he was a baby — for a long time I did not accept the fact that he was a boy. I wanted girls for that connection; the connection with my mother is that we are women, and my connection with a daughter would be the same thing.

Whenever I think of having a kid of my own, like when I watch Sesame Street and wish I were watching it with a three-year-old, it's always female. Every once in a while I catch myself and say, 'If you got a kid, it could be male, after all.' It just seems like it would be so easy with a girl. Part of that is that I would want it so badly to be different with me than it was with my mother — so I think about it in terms of a daughter. My mom had

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a better relationship with brothers than she had with me. She loved them. She was OK for them.

I would like to be a mother of daughters. That's probably the result of my mother's attitudes. She likes girls a lot, better than boys, and she just enjoyed having me around.

Others quite clearly had specifically feminist or feminist influenced attitudes about their preference for female children. These were often similar to the reasons above, but applied a political consciousness to the strong feelings they shared with that first group.

Both my husband and I were happy to have a girl. I was glad. I'm even gladder now, because I wonder how I would treat a boy. Being in the situation I'm in, divorced and struggling to make it as a woman in a man's world, there's probably less hostile bullshit that I'm doing subconsciously to her than I would to a son. It's a lucky break to have a daughter. She identifies with me, and I find that very good. I know women who sometimes seem to hate their daughters and it makes my blood run cold. They say things to them like, 'You're going to be the mommy when you grow up'; I can't bear it.

By the time my second child came, I had been in a lot of women's activities, plus I had grown up with a lot of girls, and I felt like I wanted a girl. When he came out, I said, 'It's not a boy.' I saw that he was a boy and I said that. I lived in fear that I would try to make him into a girl. I don't want to have any more children, but I would like to adopt a girl.

I wanted to have a daughter first and I did. I think the reasons I would have given then

were nonsense, like a daughter is gentle to the family, she's helpful and all this stuff. Now I think I wanted a daughter first because I know more about me than I do about men. That was more real than the other things.

I say it all the time — I only want a girl and I hope it's a girl, because otherwise I just don't know what I'm going to do. I don't want to raise a man. It would be a joy to raise a female. It seems to me like I've had men too much in my life.

I think about having a daughter and having the relationship with her that I didn't have with my mother, doing all the things with her that my mother didn't do with me, telling her all the things my mother didn't tell me. I don't know if I want another child just to do all that, but I think about it a lot. I still wish I could have had that, and I can't even have it now with my mother. I feel a great loss. I know I can give a lot to my son, and I hope we'll have a good relationship, but it's not the same. It's just not the same. I look at him now sometimes and I see him as a man, and I hope I'll do right by him. I hope he'll be the kind of man who will be decent with women but it worries me even now.

Yet another group, rather different from these latter two, wanted to have female children because they didn't want to raise sons. It was less that they desired to make daughters than that they rejected the notion of mothering boys, that put them in this category.

I always wanted girls. I think I dislike men. I could write a book on what those bastards pulled on me.

Well, I never had any brothers and had not

been around young boys, and wouldn't know much about them. Also, my father had died, and I never established a good relationship with my stepfather. I wondered whether I could do that with a son.

I mainly wanted girls because I wasn't sure I could relate to a boy; it's just that simple. I was convinced that if we had a boy it would be a kid who would want to be in the Little League and all of that, and I would die if my kid were a jock. As it turned out, my second daughter is as much like a boy as she is like a girl in terms of activity, sports, etc. But I just felt I could relate better to a girl, and interestingly, so did my husband.

When I was pregnant with Gabriel I always thought I was going to have a girl. Then one day it occurred to me that it might be a boy — and my first thought was, 'I don't want it if it's a boy, I'm not going to have a boy.' And then I thought, 'It might be a boy; it might be a boy,' and I began to reconcile myself to having a boy. I have always found it hard to have baby boys. I found it such a pleasure to have a baby girl; it was a pleasure. When my next son was born, after my daughter, I had a real keen feeling of disappointment that he was a boy.

Of course when my next son was born I was kind of numb. I didn't really want him anyway, so I didn't feel anything when he was born.

Most of the women in this group make the assumption that differences between the sexes are all natural; the distinctions are not seen as results of sex role stereotyping, as an outcome of the socialization process. Baby boys are seen as men in miniature, with feelings and sensibilities at odds with their mothers' by definition.

As the mother of a son, I recognize the frustration and pain of knowing that my child is at once of my body and alien to it; I live with the anxious understanding that my boy's life is not in my hands, that all I want for him must be wrested from the patriarchy that claims him. Though I made and fed him out of my flesh, I am now 'other' than he. He has been given to know that we are engaged in a struggle, and that that struggle is over what I am, and what he will be, when he comes to his full power. I am raising a middle class white man; it is best that we both understand what that means.

Perhaps those daughters who don't want to raise male children have understood on some very deep level that we are creating and nurturing the agents of our own oppression; once we make them, their education as men in this society will pull them from our arms, set them above us, make them the source of our degradation. To keep that from happening we must enter into conscious struggle with our sons, to actively, in our motherhood, change the 'traditional' definitions of male and female behavior. Daring to defy the socio-psychological canons that call us emasculating or seductive mothers, we must raise our sons to feel their needs, to truthfully express them. They will be sensitized; they will develop the capacity to nurture, and they will understand that to live thus is to embody and be surrounded by contradictions. They cannot help but learn — despite our teachings — that males are, and are expected to be, 'less physical, less cherishing, more intermittent in their presence, more remote, more judgmental, more for themselves, than the women who are around'¹ them.

And they will see the rewards for that behavior in social acceptance, material goods, and power.

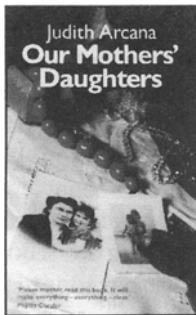
We cannot, in our commitment to this change in ourselves and our sons, underestimate the power of our own socialization — as in the fears that will surface when our little boys begin to live in the new ways our struggles open for them. Mothers of little girls can say with breezy facility to their three- and four-year-olds, 'Sure, you can wear pants as well as skirts. Why not?' But the reverse becomes a nightmare in our attempts to explain to

small boys why long gowns are only acceptable for priests, short skirts for dead Egyptians. They might wear the costumes of both sexes, but they must be warned about the humiliating, frightening and violent reception that awaits them if they do. As their mothers, we juggle to attain a balance between supporting the strength of their spirits and undermining the power of male supremacy.

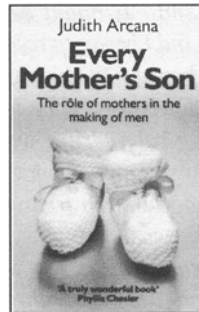
The grief inherent in this situation is fearful, and may be basic to the rejection of male children even by women of no conscious political commitment.

1. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born*, Norton, 1976, p.199

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