Feminists and Their Daughters

Carmel Shute talked to seven feminists, and two of their daughters, to find out what they wanted for their daughters, and what their daughters wanted for themselves. She spoke to: Marilyn Lake, a Melbourne historian and mother of two small girls; Carmen Heliotis, Italian-born mother of two daughters and a son; Susanna Rodell, a Melbourne journalist and also mother of two daughters and a son; Zelda D’Aprano, an activist in the equal pay movement in the 1960s; Merle Thornton, a pioneering feminist in Brisbane; and Rosemary McBride and Carole Ferrier, both feminist activists from Brisbane. She also talked to Susannah’s eleven-year-old daughter, Besha Rodell, and Carmen’s seventeen-year-old daughter, Lara Heliotis.

She began by asking Marilyn Lake about social attitudes to the birth of daughters.

Marilyn: The culture definitely does have prejudices in favour of boys. You only have to look at congratulations cards for boys and girls: they still say “Congratulations, you’re really lucky it’s a boy”; or else with girls it’s about pretty stuff. So when I was told I was having a girl — this was the second time — I was really pleased. It was quite nice the way the doctor told me, too — “It’s another little girl”. I thought, well, how terrific. Yes, I feel very privileged to have girls.

Carmen, are there particular expectations in the Greek and Italian communities about having sons?

Carmen: Yes, very much so. The expectations are that a boy is a more valuable person to have.

Susanna, do you think feminists have a special relationship with their daughters because of their feminism?

Susanna: I've always got really huge with each pregnancy, and every time I always had the greengrocer or the butcher or whoever saying, “Oh, it's so big, it's going to be a big healthy boy” — and I'd grit my teeth.

Susanna, do you think feminists have a special relationship with their daughters because of their feminism?

Susanna: I know I definitely felt that. I think there is a definite sense of identification with a girl, a sense that this is somebody who is like me and very close to me, and has that very visceral bond, but who perhaps won’t have the same sorts of limitations that I had. She will be able to do things that I couldn’t do, and things that I had to fight very hard to do will come a little more easily for her.
MARILYN: Feminists have a loyalty to their own sex. And I think they can express that through having daughters. There is that extra dimension of pleasure, loyalty, pride, added to the mother-daughter bond. That makes it very special. I think, along with Susanna, that in the 1980s we might expect that the limitations we grew up under might be removed. And so we're conscious of opening the world for our daughters, and not having to face the same restrictions on them that they might have faced in the 1950s or 1960s.

What was it like for an earlier generation of feminist mothers, Zelda?

ZELDA: I became a feminist later in years and, by this stage, of course, Leonie was a young woman. My feminism always made me aware of mistakes that I'd made. To a certain degree, when Leonie was very young, I conditioned her into the female role — not totally, because I wasn't totally successful, and I'm pleased about that. For example, when she was very little, and allowed to choose books for herself, she bought all boys' books. And, of course, I was always buying her girly books. When I mentioned this to her and asked her why she bought these boys' books, she simply quite clearly stated that they were far more interesting. And even after she told me that I still didn't wake up to what was going on, not until years later.

Merle, do you think feminists have a special relationship with their daughters?

MERLE: Well, I think feminists have a special relationship with all their children, because they're trying to bring them into a new way of life. I think I have a special relationship with both my son and my daughter, and I try in both cases to counter any stereotypical treatment of the child from outside concerning the way boys and girls should be treated.

I remember my daughter came back from kindergarten — she would have been three or four at the time — and I'd put some new trousers on her to go to kindergarten, warm ones, of the kind that used to be called Coogans, after Jackie Coogan. She came home and said that her kindy teacher had said she'd have to wear a skirt. I said, "Oh, she didn't, she wouldn't have said that." And she said, "Oh yes, she did." So I said, "Well, I'll speak to the teacher." I went next day and said to her, "Sigrid told me you said she had to wear a skirt. That wouldn't be right, would it?" And she said, "Oh yes, it would. Because the little boys laughed at her." And I said, "Well, that's for you to say something to the little boys, isn't it?"

ROSEMARY: Just the other day I said to Sarah, "What do you think a feminist is?" And she said it's a mummy who doesn't go to the tuckshop. Someone who yells at demonstrations. So I think I've really got to push the positive sides of feminism!

What approach did you take to bringing up your daughter, Rosemary?

ROSEMARY: As a feminist I don't aim to arm my daughter as a warrior to fight the battle where I've left off. But I think I make her aware of women's role in society and I'm very conscious at home of ensuring that the boys do an equal amount of housework. I'm careful that she isn't burdened with the domestic work — as so often happens in a family where there's only one girl. I think it's that kind of thing that's more important.

What about when, say, your daughters want Barbie dolls or frilly dresses and want to wear make-up?

ROSEMARY: Those are really externals. Simone de Beauvoir once pointed out that a lot of women were ostracised by other women in the women's movement because they actually wore make-up or they shaved their legs or whatever. I think all the regalia of femininity are really externals which women of my generation had to give up in order to project themselves as real people. But I actually think my daughter's generation don't have to fight that battle — and I also think that there is always going to be peer-group pressure. I don't agree with censorship — I'm a product of the '60s — so I can't really censor Barbie dolls and Cabbage Patch Kids and all the rest of it. I think really what I have to do as a mother is to prepare Sarah for life and to make sure she's equipped with certain skills, and that she's able to stand up for herself. She may sometimes wear frilly dresses or make-up, but I don't think any man will make a slave of her.

CAROLE: I suppose one of the points, too, is that to be a feminist or a socialist you don't have to present yourself as ugly or grumpy or generally unappealing. I'm someone who hasn't worn lipstick for about twenty years, and when I stopped wearing it in the '60s it was one aspect of feeling I was liberated. So it's a bit of a shock when your eight or nine-year-old starts emerging covered with make-up ...

And what do you do when that happens?

CAROLE: Basically I just let her do it. Perhaps not in certain contexts, but certainly if she feels comfortable with herself, I think that's probably more the issue.

Susanna, you also came up against the problem of ideology not always coinciding with your daughter's expectations.

SUSANNA: We had all sorts of little struggles from an early age. I remember I used to dress her in little overalls and stripy T-shirts and that sort of thing. It took quite a long period of struggle before I finally gave in and, in fact, realised that when I was five years old I really loved that stuff, too. And I thought, why should I deprive her of that sort of pleasure? So I just threw my ideology to the winds, and I'd make her little tutus with sequins all over them, and fairy dresses, and we ended up having a pretty good time of it.

MARILYN: I was quite happy about my children having the notorious Barbie doll, and other things like that, because ultimately I don't believe that Barbie dolls do any harm. One of the interesting things with my daughters, particularly the young one, is how she plays with Ken and Barbie. Her Barbie always goes to work, drops her babies from the
car into a creche, and bosses Ken around. In fact, she reconstructs the whole meaning of Ken and Barbie in terms of her own life.

Zelda, did your daughter want all the trappings of femininity back in the late '40s, before Barbie dolls were invented?

ZELDA: Well, in Leonie's case, no. She wasn't into all that. As far as I can remember, she only had one doll. And one of the things I was very aware of was not to condition her into the whole fashion thing. TV, of course, makes it much harder these days for parents in that respect. But this was in the early days of television, and we didn't have a TV set. So I never did dress her in frills. I had her in slacks for the winter months, and anything that was sensible. So Leonie never went through that crazy teenage stage.

She was an only child and we always took her to good theatre and drama — because, coming from the working class, I always had a deep feeling inside me that most of my class didn't appreciate this area of culture, because we never had the opportunities to do so. So I went out of my way to see that Leonie had these opportunities. And this was more important to me than dressing her in frills. She never showed any interest in that.

Susanna, did you treat your son differently from your daughter?

SUSANNA: I certainly made an effort to bring my son up in very much the same way as my daughter. In some ways I was careful with him in ways I wasn't with her. From a very early age, all my kids have been in creche, and he was exposed to a lot of very definite little boy stuff. He absorbed that, and acted it out at home in a way Besha never did, so I took more care with him in the sense of making sure that he got a lot of the gentle stuff, and a lot of the cuddles and nurturing, making sure that he was allowed to have dolls as well. There's a real tension there, between allowing him to develop in a masculine way so that he won't necessarily be stomped on when he goes outside the house, and making sure that the other side of him is reinforced. In a way, it's been harder to raise the son.

MERLE: Because our culture does value the masculine over the feminine, it's much easier to bring up feminist daughters these days, because the culture approves nowadays of girls playing with train sets and blocks and those traditionally masculine things. But it doesn't approve as much of boys playing with dolls. I rather resent the fact that there's an expectation that girls are not allowed to have dolls, but that they should play with train sets, whereas it doesn't go the other way round. I think, in fact, both sexes should play nurturing games, should play more caring games.

SUSANNA: It's a funny thing, my son likes playing with dolls, but he had always assumed that all dolls were girls — which is interesting. At one point I went out and bought him a little doll in overalls, thinking "Here's a boy doll", and he went out and named it a girl's name. As a matter of fact, he gave it my name — which is also interesting. Finally, I had to go out and spend a long time finding a doll with male genitalia so that he couldn't mistake it for a girl. Even then it took a while for it to sink in that this was boy doll and that he
could be nurturing it. He eventually did get into it: he really loved that doll and he still does.

Marilyn: From a very early age I introduced my children to the term “sexist”. I’m interested at what a young age they’ve grasped that — so that they now quite readily pronounce on all and sundry, whether on television shows, or what children say at school, or what teachers do, as sexist. I think that’s really heartening, when they can already see the unfairness in a sexist system. But working out how to deal with what they confront as sexist behaviour is something that’s far more difficult for them.

Rosemary: When my son first started school he was misbehaving, and he was punished by being sent to the girls’ playground. He immediately said to the headmaster, “That’s really sexist punishment. And anyway I like playing with girls.” I think he’d picked that up from me: he was aware of sexism from a very early age. So I think politics is something that is, in a sense, in your blood.

Carmen: Yes, I think it starts quite early. I remember with Lara I felt that when she was at school she had to make sure that enough of the teachers’ attention was devoted to the girls. So I tried to make her aware of all the politics within the classroom, and how male teachers — or even female teachers — are likely to behave towards boys and girls. I was stressing the point that she’s got to grow up thinking she’s going to be independent and earn her own living. Society automatically does that. But with a girl you have to counteract all those ideas.

Marilyn: I think you’re a smart cookie, why don’t you think about being a doctor?” And she said, “Oh, but girls don’t be doctors.” And I said, “But, Sigrid, you know they do. There’s so-and-so who’s a friend, and she’s a doctor; and there’s so-and-so who’s also a friend, and she’s a doctor, too”. “Oh, yes,” she said. So there were constantly quite major things about the way my daughter would see her future, that I had to work against.

Zelda: I recall the period of my life when Leonie was going through her teens as a period of constant anxiety for me whenever she went out anywhere. Apart from the horror of rape in my mind was the terrible horror of the violence that often goes with it. And, in fact, I would never go to sleep until I heard her come in.

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Was there a dilemma between giving your daughters independence, and making them aware of the dangers women face in our society?

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Will you be disappointed if your daughters don’t become feminists when they’re older?

Marilyn: I can’t ever imagine that they wouldn’t be. I find it very difficult, given what they already understand, to imagine that they wouldn’t be feminists. I’m probably in for a shock.

Carmen: Yes, I’d be heartbroken to think that either of my daughters would just simply become totally dependent or, even worse, anti-feminist. I would be very disappointed.

Suzanna: I would certainly be disappointed if my daughters turned out to be anti-feminist. I wouldn’t necessarily be disappointed if they weren’t feminist in the sense of it being an enormous part of their lives. But I’d be really upset if it turned out that being a woman in some way or other limited their choices.

Rosemary: I don’t want her necessarily to become a particularly active feminist, but I want her to be aware of feminist issues, and also just to be able to stick up for herself.

Rosemary, did your own upbringing have an influence on the way you treat your daughter?

Rosemary: Well, I come from a long line of matriarchs. My grandmother, my mother, they were all women without men: the men in
our family died very young, or left home, or whatever. So I think I was brought up in a very unauthoritarian household. And I'm sure that influences me in how I treat my daughter. I don't present myself as an authority figure to her. I think, because of that, she tends to be freer in the way she behaves, and she tends not to rebel so much.

ZELDA: My parents were migrants, and the fact that my mother didn't have any of her own family here gave her a tendency to cling to us. She tried to live through us, and I found this very oppressive. Apart from that, my mother was a very strong woman in many respects, and she had a very positive influence on me. However, I found this clinging possessiveness, and the emotional blackmail, very difficult to cope with. I was determined that in my relationship to Leonie this would not be the case. I felt that because of that experience I couldn't make her think what I thought; I couldn't make her agree with all the philosophies I had.

MERLE: My family also had a strong matriarchy. I was very influenced by that. I knew my great grandmother; she lived until I was thirteen. My grandmother was a very important person in my life, and the female line was always an important consideration in our family. I realise how important now as I find I would very much like my daughter to have a daughter.

Lara and Besha, what do you think of your mothers' feminism?

BESA: For me, as a girl, I'm not worried that she'll say no, you can't go out and play sport with the boys — you have to sit at home and knit, or something like that. So it's a good thing for me.

LARA: It's sort of pride, that she can stand on her own two feet and is independent, and doesn't need a male to stand there and look after her.

Do you think your mother has tried to bring you up in a consciously non-sexist way?

BESA: Yes, very much so. She tells both me and my brother when something is sexist. My brother has taken it up so strongly that he used to pretend he was pregnant with Anthony, the boy doll that mum got. I felt that this wasn't his role, because I'm the one who's supposed to get pregnant, because I'm a girl. I told him that, and he said 'That's sexist. If I'm not allowed to be pregnant...'

LARA: I think that's a wonderful attitude for him to have: I'd much rather him be pregnant than me.

How much credit do you give your mothers for the way you've turned out?

BESA: It's not only her: it's my dad too. He's like a feminist, too, because Rugby League are fine — if the truth be known, previous ALRs were too academically oriented anyway — but let's be reasonably attuned to an approach and style which lend themselves to a working class audience.

Let me point some directions: An interview with Tom Uren — what changed him from boxer to reformist socialist? What are his views on a "new socialist party"? Or, a round-table discussion with western suburban workers — men, women, migrants, etc. What do they think of the Hawke government? Are they happy with tightening their belts? What are their views of "socialism"? Or an open interview with several housewives: what is their opinion of current child care facilities? Medicare? Education? Domestic violence? The feminist movement? Or even, on Rugby League, an interview with Roy Masters (retiring coach of St. George) — why is he "getting out"? What is the political structure of modern football? How much corruption is there? Does he really believe the "silvertail/libro" dichotomy that he himself largely fostered?

Let's be unafraid of a full range of views but, nevertheless, let us constantly raise the question of socialism. I know we won't always get answers we like but, in such a way we may point some concrete directions for revolutionary work among
he works for the equal opportunity, and he's influenced me as well — they both have. They've made me think a lot about things that other people in my grade haven't thought about yet.

LARA: I'm a good example in that, while I don't live with my father, he's a raving chauvinist. I can go and see him now, and I think, "Yuk, how can you possibly be like that, and expect your wife to go and get the coffee for you and have your dinner ready for you when you get home?" He used to ask me to make his coffee, and I'd say, "No way. Get up and do it yourself".

Would you call yourselves feminists?

BESHA: I'm not sure. I'm very against anything like the T-shirts that people have that say "Anything boys can do girls can do better". I don't like those sorts of things, because they're just silly. I think "Why?", and you can't really give an explanation for that.

LARA: I agree about the T-shirts. Things that say women are better are just as sexist as ones that say men are better. So I'm more for equality than "Women are better than men". I disagree with that.

But would you call yourself a feminist?

BESHA: There's a girl in my grade who was interviewed on the radio and she was talking about how she felt about things, and the interviewer said to her, "Are you the little feminist, then?", and she said "Why shouldn't I be?" He was saying it as if it was a bad thing.

LARA: Not a total feminist. Not the extremes — the things like changing man-holes and things like that: I think that's really going too far. And I disagree with the women who think they are better than men. So I guess

that's not really a feminist. It's close.

What sort of things do you want in your life when you're older?

BESHA: I want to be treated equally, because there's no reason why I should be treated more or less equally than men. I'm just another human being.

LARA: I entirely agree with that. But I think what I want most is independence: to do what I want to do, when I want to do it, and with whom.


CARMEL SHUTE is an organiser with the ABC Staff Union in Melbourne.

UPSET

The article on Rugby League in ALR 100 left me feeling angry and upset. I finished it very much with the feeling that David Burchell loves Rugby League but is too ashamed to admit it. I, too, have many criticisms of the game, but this does

not stop me from loving and enjoying it, or wanting it to improve and develop.

He says that it is a spectacle of excess without any discernible aesthetic. This seems just plain wrong. I have visions of Bob Fulton or Roy Masters poring over videos, agonising over tactics and devising complex backline moves. What would they make of his claim? Even Rex Mossop is scathing of sloppy play and waxes lyrical over exhibitions of skill.

He says there is gratuitous violence. I agree, but I strongly suspect that the League executive is deeply worried about this. Rather than attracting people to the game, as he seems to imply, the League can see lost dollars at the gate, and worried parents who will not let their sons play. Witness the ever-increasing severity of the judiciary, and sports commentators falling over themselves to praise the "hard but clean" state of Origin series. They told us ad nauseam that Rugby League was the winner.

He says that very few of its leading exponents last beyond the age of thirty, by which time they are often balding and arthritic. Injuries and declining ability are a problem in many professional sports. I think it is important not to conflate injuries and violence. On a political level, Ray Price has already pointed out quite forcefully that the League exploits players' love of the game by not insuring them adequately.

He says that hooting and mocking the referee is an integral part of any serious fan's pleasure. I consider myself a serious fan who enjoys the skills of the game. I am quite happy to concede that the best side usually wins, and I am sure I would enjoy the game even more if the violence was cut out.

He says that Rugby League is a parody of class divisions. Players are now being poached mid-season and going to the highest bidder. The remorseless advance of national media and a national marketplace means that club identification will be increasingly city-based, echoing moves already made by Australian Rules.

As a psychotherapist I am mystified by his comment that Rugby League is playing out the dramas of psychiatry in sporting form. I do know, however, that no activity is intrinsically interesting; it all depends on how much love and care you invest in it. Within the framework and rules of Rugby League there exist the spaces to be exciting and creative, as there does in any complex ball game. If this creative space is nurtured there is every possibility that Rugby League can develop and transcend the gratuitous violence that spoils the game.

Vittorio Cintio,

Wentworth Falls, NSW.