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# Women and Anger: Cultural Prohibitions and the Feminine Ideal

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Jean Baker Miller Training Institute  
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## Work in Progress

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Wellesley College  
Wellesley, Massachusetts



## Women and Anger - Cultural Prohibitions and the Feminine Ideal

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### About the Author

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### Abstract

*Women's problems with the expression of anger are traceable to cultural prohibitions which emphasize as ideal, a feminine prototype devoid of anger or aggressiveness and characterized by selflessness and service to others. Our culture's tendency to confuse anger with violence, oppression, or other destructive uses of this basic emotion inhibits women from expressing anger on their behalf when appropriate and healthy. These inhibitions in women interact symbiotically with socialized characteristics of men in the "masculine ideal" of toughness, aggressiveness and detachment from tender emotionality leading to gender role behavior that is dysfunctional and socially dangerous.*

Women's expression of anger is usually thwarted, inhibited, or diverted in our culture. This phenomenon acquires the character of a cultural prohibition when we realize that this culture has taken as "natural" the view that women's anger is a destructive emotion. It is not in keeping with the feminine ideal. Claims of biological or social imperatives strongly reinforce these norms making them "the law of the land". Religious and medical/biological dicta are then brought in to reinforce the prohibitions, to lend power and authority to this cultural bias, and to mandate conformity.

To understand the inhibitions that prevent rebellious acts, we need to become aware that women's behavior is under strong and old injunctions. Given women's capacity to bear and nurture life and their socialization into the mothering role, the inhibitions of aggression in women appear to be protective of the helpless infant, that is, they would appear in this context to be biologically and socially adaptive. Rich (1976), Chodorow (1978) and others have helped us to separate this social role from women's biological

endowment. When, however, these inhibitions generalize to other contexts and defy rational purposes, we need to look for other determinants. These determinants keep the expression of anger under strict control. The factors important to keep in mind are: 1) the social position of women as subordinates, 2) the social need to maintain women in service tasks and 3) the role of the "feminine ideal" which in its construction, maintains both subordination and service/caretaking intact.

The injunctions against the expression of anger in women are not restricted to this culture, but neither are they found in all societies in the same way. In our society, these prohibitions are for the most part unconscious, preventing women from complaining openly, taking assertive action, and expressing protest on their own behalf. These prohibitions are strengthened by irrational fears of women's destructive power, fears acquired in infancy (Bernardez, 1978). We take in these inhibitions early in the process of our socialization, at home and at school, where the expression of anger, negative feelings, and aggressive action are discouraged as "unfeminine". The equation of anger with solely destructive emotions in our culture further discourages the freedom necessary to discriminate between aggressive-destructive and assertive-constructive anger as well as a whole range of so-called negative behaviors, including valid criticism. Kaplan (1979), Lemer (1980), and Miller (1983), have identified these gender-specific prohibitions, and note that men are allowed and encouraged to express negative emotions more freely--in fact often in disregard of other's welfare--while

women are inhibited continuously from such expressions, and denigrated if they make them. Responsible for these differences, the *feminine ideal*, based on irrational expectations about mothers, reinforces this state of affairs. And both women and men hold these irrational expectations about mothers intensely.

If we pay attention to the stereotype of the ideal mother, we see it as devoid of aggressiveness. Love and benevolence are to be showered onto others without concern for self-aims. In the idealized mother image, the selfless creature who needs nothing and lives of her giving all to others is never rejecting or unkind--an actual reprint of the omnipotent figure of infancy. In our fantasized desires, that grandiose, nurturing, always loving, always empathic figure is necessary to relieve our pain. Chodorow and Contratto (1982) have noted how this perfect mother is expected potentially of all women. D. Dinnerstein (1976) has commented on the role it plays in heterosexual arrangements.

In stark contrast, the other mother, (the one who is deserted, unsupported, depressed and angry) the vengeful, malignant stereotype is the other side of the coin. When a woman behaves in anything less than a totally empathic, non-aggressive, other-serving manner, this negative stereotype is aroused. According to this set of irrational notions, because power resides in this image, all women are powerful, regardless of their actual circumstances in life, their poverty, victimization or subordination. And that power, since it is terrifying, is to be restrained and controlled. The sexual and reproductive power of women mixed with the magical/infernal

power of mothers dictates that their submissiveness be procured and for that purpose all traces of anger must be wiped out (Bernardez, 1982). Women are to collaborate in this notion by wanting to be closer and closer to this "feminine ideal".

### On the sociology of anger

Sociologist Lyman in his paper "On Rage and Political Memories" (1979) examines the way in which collective repression of painful political memories prevents victims from speaking about their injuries. The victims find themselves "speechless," unable to forget and unable to learn from the past. Whether the past that needs to be forgotten is Vietnam, French collaboration during World War II or Nazi genocide, Lyman contends that rage is fundamental to claim the reality of a past of oppression and to proceed to liberation. He calls rage an "essential political emotion". In his paper he presents as an example of the liberating potential of anger the People's Republic of China's early policies of "speak bitterness" and of "struggle meetings" to transfer *private anger* into *collective anger*. Until the truth about what happened in Vietnam could be disclosed, most veterans of that war could only express their anger chaotically and self-destructively, as if it were their own problem, an "illness" acquired in the war.

Similar forces have kept us from acknowledging women's difficult and unequal lot in the privacy of our consulting offices. That is, we take the anger as a private, personal statement, as if the women don't share a collective experience very different than that of men. But the truth is that women and men are not

alike nor equal. We have approached a psychology of humans from a perspective of denial. Although it is true that we are basically much more alike than dissimilar, psychological theories have been regulated by the desire not to see or deal with inequality, nor with the particular social circumstances responsible for it (Bernardez-Bonesatti, 1976). In fact, we are different and unequal in social conditions. We are reared and conditioned in very different ways and we have unequal advantages. We are thus "persons with different injunctions, prohibitions and introjections" (Bernardez, 1979) and some of these are so common and prevalent in our culture that I suggest they merit the term "social introjects" to differentiate them from those more discretely specific to a particular family. That is, women and men have different *social* introjects. In men, for instance, the prohibitions about crying (expressing grief overtly) form part of this complex *social introject*.

Anger is a different emotion for men and women. Miller (1983) observes this important reality: men and women are in two fundamentally different groups while intimately related and linked; men are the dominant group and women are the subordinate group in our society. This *social* reality is to be kept constantly in mind even when women may be dominant in specific private households.

Miller links the suppression of anger to the sociology of oppression. The political forces that keep subordinates down are characterized by this very constant element of forbidding anger. Subordinates are labeled "bad" names if they express anger

and this is a method dominants use successfully to keep subordinates under control. Dominants designate, create, and judge social reality in accordance with their needs and thus maintain their dominance by preventing overt rebellion and change. These actions (rebellion and change) are empowered and enacted by anger. Furthermore, anger has the effect of permitting the internal "reading" of the grievances the person feels s/he has suffered. This element of anger is also threatening and makes anger doubly prohibited in groups that are kept under conditions of inequality (Bernardez, 1979).

The labels dominants ascribe to subordinates to keep them under control vary depending on the prominence, respect and/or popularity of those systems that delineate proper behavior. Miller (1983) points out how in our culture medical-psychiatric terminology has provided modern labels that have kept anger as a pathological emotion in women. In psychoanalytic parlance the term "castrating" has been used to derogate and to attempt control of angry behavior in women. Intimidation, thus, is one of the major ways in which domination is kept in force by convincing women that if they feel anger, bitterness, and resentment this is a sign of their inferiority, sickness, lack of virtue or lack of femininity, not the result of their unequal status.

I would like to stress how these injunctions, if obeyed and *forgotten*, transform the experience of anger in women from one of "response to injustice", "self-preservation", "reaction to protect from invasion or harm" (that is, a variety of healthy responses in defense of the self) into one of hatred or hatefulness. Anger silenced contributes to the making

of the most ubiquitous "symptom" of women today: depression. Self-hatred and powerlessness are two major socially-learned factors that contribute to the inner experience of depression. Further, the situation is compounded if this experience is labeled as a "symptom" of an illness--because unless we make explicit that social conditioning is in great measure responsible for this attempt at adaptation to the ideal of "femininity," we are making the victim responsible for her condition of incapacity or dysfunction. In other words, we are all responsible for reinforcing a state of pathogenic adaptation to social conditions of oppression in women if we do not make explicit the existence of such a set of conditions and make it possible for the individual to acquire a choice about it--the choice to defy acquiescence to this order.

Sociologist Peter Lyman (1979) in reviewing Freud's classic Dora case calls attention to this kind of misnaming and considers it crucial in explaining Freud's failure with her. Lyman sees Dora as a case study in "silenced rage". As you may recall, Freud believed, along with Dora, that her father treated her as a sexual commodity. Yet, Freud takes the problem to be not her exploitation and her right to respond with rage but her use of physical symptoms to "speak" her rage, her "hysteria". Lyman contends that "hysteria" is a repressive designation when used as evidence of instability or irrationality, rather than as a reponse to an unjust situation. The victim-patient is denied the legitimization of her complaint, the experience of rightful anger and therefore she is denied the *explicit condemnation* of those in power. Thus, she resorts to *covert condemnation* accom-

panied by self-punishment for the presence of hatefulness along with expiation through illness and suffering.

Women are particularly vulnerable to the threat of abandonment, isolation and disconnection. In addition, because they are often dependent on relationships with men for their livelihood, their direction and identity, their status and safety in the world, women experience great fear at the threat of the dissolution of such relationships. Many women struggle desperately to preserve relations with men that are clearly destructive. Even when abandoned and when the dread has become a reality, the woman still has to deal with fears of being unlovable, unfeminine and hateful. Although anger may be more available to the woman who has been abandoned, it does not mean that the anger will emerge in a liberating way. Anger may be experienced without full understanding of its origins, its merits or its aims. The fact of victimization, the way the victim has been made to collaborate in it and the injuries and losses sustained throughout may not be conscious. This recognition is a much larger task, still shrouded in numerous misconceptions, dishonesties, and prohibitions. Many women, in fact, persist in expressing anger about concrete grievances of far lesser importance than the serious injuries they have received. This element is also part of the picture: the pressures to deny and repress the fact that they are subordinates has been effective. As R. D. Laing, (1967) who has clarified the complex way in which these injunctions work, has expressed it, "they have forgotten that they have forgotten". In fact, women comply with the negative expectations of

the stereotype: if they complain they should sound bad, they should sound irrational, they should sound ungenerous and sick. How are we to understand this? That happens, I suggest, because we become accomplices in our own brainwashing and we feel helpless to defy the systemic forces that entrap us. This anger is vastly different in its effects than the anger that liberates. This anger is closer to what Lyman, using Nietzsche's term, calls *ressentiment*, the self-destructive righteousness experienced "by the oppressed who are silenced by politics".

The anger that liberates is the conscious response to an awareness of injustices suffered, of losses and grievances sustained and is the result of breaking away and defying the injunction to keep silent about it. The anger that liberates involves self-love and awareness of the responsibility of making choices. It is not concerned with making others suffer but with stopping the subject's own suffering. It leads to connections with the past, the recovery of painful memories, grieving the losses, assessing the complicity of the person in her own submission and reconstructing the future.

### **Anger In relationships of equals**

In examining the characteristics of the expression of anger that contribute to its health-promoting, emotional value (Bernardez, 1984) we find:

1. *Integration of anger with loving feelings.*

When feelings of regard and consideration for the other are completely dissociated from the expression of anger, rather than temporarily suspended, the character of the expression

resembles hatred and it tends to evoke a defensive response.

2. *Freedom from desires to injure, put down, dominate or take revenge.*

These destructive, injurious aspects turn the expression of anger into an *attack* and, as such, they also elicit fight-responses.

3. *A separation of the anger caused in the present from instances in the past that have not been consciously acknowledged, discharged and "finished".*

Frequently the reason why certain angry reactions are of inappropriate intensity, is that they are repetitions of unexpressed frustrations in the past. If it is free from past injuries, disappointments and unacknowledged resentments, the angry response has great power. If it is uncontaminated, it has the capacity to elicit more positive acceptance. It cannot be easily dismissed.

4. *Freedom from defensive anger.*

Anger may be used as a defense rather than as a basic emotional response. In these instances, anger is used as a means to protect the self from feelings of loss, longing, thwarted dependency or lowered self-esteem in a reflex, stereotypical manner. This kind of anger is more frequently encountered in men, whose upbringing generally denies them the freer expression of sadness, disappointment or fear. In this case the emotion of anger, along with the angry behavior, serves to keep such forbidden feelings from coming into

awareness or from being communicated.

Irrational or excessive guilt in both men and women also can lead to the expression of anger as "a defense".

5. *Anger as a vulnerable state.*

The honest expression of anger is an overt and genuine communication. In this instance, the person conveys her/his vulnerability and openly discloses and reveals her/himself. The effect of this disclosure is powerful since these characteristics (openness and vulnerability and anger) are not often seen together. Another powerful effect in helpful expressions of anger is the holding of the other in respect despite the disapproval of his/her behavior. Following the work of the Stone Center group (Miller 1984; Surrey 1984; Jordan 1986; Kaplan 1984; and Stiver 1983) the difference in this expression of anger is that it occurs *in relation* with, rather than disconnected from, the other person. But for anger to be communicated in such a positive way, it is necessary to have:

- A measure of *successful development* with knowledge of one's own limits, boundaries, rights and needs and a similar awareness of those aspects in the other person.

- A modicum of *self-esteem and self-love*.

People who have been raised in environments that have radically destroyed their faith in themselves and their self-respect have no response to indignity or to violations of the self; they either accept these as their due or they fight them in a violent and destructive manner that leads to their further victimization. Abused

women and men who become drug addicted or who enter into a chronic struggle with the law, are examples of the devastation that abuse and disrespect create and how lack of awareness contributes to the discharge of private, impotent rage instead of angry, assertive and collective action.

### **Anger in a context of power inequality**

The expression of anger can be used to manipulate others with less power. In a relationship of equals, the threat to the loss of a relationship is possibly an incentive for change. But in a relationship of power inequality, when anger is expressed by the person in greater power it can have the effect of intimidation. It, then, serves to keep the less powerful person doing what the other wants, that is, complying and obeying the powerful person's rules and expectations. Thus, persons in power need to be particularly aware of this factor and need to subject themselves to more self-restraint than others. They should especially understand what motivates their angry behavior and what its effects will be on those they lead. This does not mean that persons in authority cannot express anger when justified but rather that there are important limiting factors that should involve them in being more explicit, more tolerant, more willing to receive feedback. Parents, teachers, therapists, supervisors, and all persons in positions of dominance who have some control of others' welfare should have a greater "identification with the subordinate" than other persons in relations of equality.

The threat of force, of bodily harm, of abandonment, of loss of love, when conveyed in the expression of anger covertly or overtly, result in oppressive subduing. Anger that is placed at the service of domination should be called by a different name. It is not the basic emotion that I am trying to describe. It is not solely the existence of a power differential which needs to be examined in order to judge equality but the other characteristics as well, for instance, the methods by which anger is resolved and the modes of expression for it. In disputes between men and women often what is a strength of one is a weakness of the other. Women, for instance, often are more able to express verbally the way they feel about events, persons or interactions. Raised with greater interpersonal sensitivity and attention to affective states, they have greater ability and satisfaction in the verbal expression of grievances once they are free to do so. Men are more handicapped in this area and for the most part they have been trained to utilize anger to intimidate, direct, threaten, compete and to resort to physical force to resolve disputes. On the other hand they tend to use rational arguments more successfully than women and they may describe what women do as "irrational" or "emotional", out of discomfort with more affective modes of expression. The expression of emotion has been wrongly equated with characteristics of underdeveloped, primitive and unpolished people. By contrast, control of such personal expressions has been linked with the character of the aristocratic and dignified people. That's why put-downs of women as "child-like" or backhanded compliments of

"colorfulness" to black or Hispanic people are indications of the lower status that emotional expressiveness has among dominant whites.

### **Situational and Interpersonal dynamics influencing the inhibition of anger**

It is important to emphasize that in situations that would normally arouse anger in healthy persons, a conflict originates when there is arousal of anger on the one hand and a simultaneous prohibition of its expression (or threats to that effect) on the other. This kind of situation prevents the discharge of affect and thus the maintenance of self-esteem. Being treated with disregard for her needs, ignoring what she says and expecting automatic compliance are some of the ways in which many women have been discriminated and ignored. In the more obvious case of violations, women are in dependent or "hostage" positions (Bart and O'Brien, 1985). The nature of the social context automatically increases the chance that anger would not be expressed openly, would be suppressed or expressed indirectly. The threats to the person's security, stability, and self-esteem are so much greater and immediate than the need to express the emotion, that the healthy expression of anger is impossible. The healthy person may still be aware of the contained anger, particularly when aware of the censorship and its impositions. But in the case of many women, the lack of awareness of their social situation, their training and socialization into a victim's position lead to internalizing the censorship and overt depression. In this case, the person basically submits to the situation that would

cause indignation and defiance in the more fully aware person.

In a person educated to view anger as destructive and not clearly differentiated from hostility, revenge, or violent rage, all anger comes to be distrusted and to be censored excessively. The lack of awareness prevents the exploration of this emotion to investigate its true origins. The lack of training in the expression of anger brings with it a lack of awareness of the positive results of its expression: empowerment, increased self-respect, clarity of purpose. It makes the woman an easy target for the person with a contrasting development, often a male with uninhibited discharge of aggressive energy, without check and without regard for others. That is, the woman who has been trained to dissociate and split off aspects of herself that she sees as enraged or violent, has a strong predisposition towards entering into symbiotic association with a man who dissociates tender, vulnerable and caring aspects of self and who appears to have apparent freedom in the expression of negative emotions. Both may have in common experiences of violent abuse in childhood but, as dictated by gender role prescriptions, the male becomes himself an abuser and the woman the abused. In both of them the repetition of a frightful history of childhood assault and the repeated desecration of the tender and loving self they had as children (as represented most often by the woman), occurs again and again with no awareness of the origins of this hatred and of the role gender plays in assigning the parts to be played.

I hope it is clear that the healthy expression of anger in women is the result of a concerted effort to

restore healthy aspects of the self, increase freedom from social prohibitions and integrate dissociated aspects of the self which have been viewed as negative. For a healthy expression of anger the individual woman needs to grow away from stereotypes of femininity, and to move toward sufficient self-esteem and loving self-regard, the social and emotional support of others, and freedom from fear and social disapproval. This is not an instantaneous conquest. It takes error and impropriety; it needs continuous refinement and fairly frequent exercise in action.

Only when this step has been achieved and solidified can we consider an evolution that transcends the expression of anger in provocative circumstances. For this "absence of response" to be an authentic sign of positive development, it should not be due to repression as a result of fear, intimidation or censorship. This is an important distinction; one learns it rapidly under dictatorial political regimes: the absence of anger, defiance, and rebellion is the result of conscious or unconscious compliance with the dictatorship rule of silence

Following Ghandi, a pacifist is a person who, through loving indignation, has transcended her own violence, not one who is afraid to fight. The systematic exploration of women's conflicts with the expression of anger in the interpersonal and social arenas by a persistent and loving effort may restore the lost internal freedom.

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