

Breaking with Tradition

Martha Estela Perez-Williams

BEFORE YOU READ: Patriarchy means a family or society where fathers or men have more power than women. Share what you know about patriarchy. What is your experience with it in your family or in society?

I Was Supposed to Be a Housewife

If you grow up in a Mexican family, you learn traditional family values. You learn to respect the elderly, build a support system for the family, and share as much time with each other as you can. Traditional family values are tied to a patriarchal culture. So, you also learn that women do not get to make decisions freely. Women suffer violence in families in many ways, and mine was no exception.

It was a rule for me to get married, obey my husband, and take care of a home. I was supposed to do all the housework, take care of my two sons,

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and take care of my husband. Meanwhile, I was trying to be a perfect student so I could keep my scholarships. In

Mexican culture, you are not a woman. You are just a mother and a wife. You don't have the right to make your dreams come true. You are the last thing on your list of priorities.

Education Changed My Life

However, I wanted something different. Even though my ex-husband wanted to control my dreams, I finished my bachelor's degree. My next goal was to get a master's degree and then a Ph.D. I worked very hard to become a professor in the country where I was born. While I was in those programs, I learned about the law and that women have rights. This is not something that was taught to me when I was growing up.



Mural in Oaxaca, Mexico. "Silence kills." Photo by Manfred from: <http://www.thisfabtrek.com>.

Education changed my life. Studying gender in college gave me the strength to break from tradition. For example, I understood that my husband's controlling behavior was a form of psychological abuse. Since I had a job and was not financially dependent on my husband, I was more free to break away from him. If women have jobs and decent pay, they can make decisions for themselves and not feel afraid.

Moreover, my dear relatives and lovely friends were so helpful when I had a difficult time. For instance, when I told my mother that I was going to get divorced she told me, "If you

already made the decision, then do it. Time flies by, and if you don't do it, you will regret it." With those words, I felt her support. In addition, my grandmother took care of my kids while I studied and worked.

Divorced and Reborn

Getting divorced was one of the hardest decisions I ever made. I broke up my own family. On the other hand, I was reborn. It was my first time dealing with a home by myself, and it was not easy, but one of my sons told me one day that I had made the right choice because he saw how I developed my career. Today, my oldest son is a high school teacher, and the younger one is studying to be a teacher. They followed in my footsteps. I raised them with a feminist consciousness and I'm proud of it. Fortunately, the new generations are more at liberty to make decisions and not be judged.

A New Challenge

That might be considered a story with a happy ending. But that was not the end of it. Life has more surprises. Now, I'm in the United States as an immigrant. I have married a man here who is the love of my life. What is next for me? As you see, life is testing me again. I am middle-aged. I left a job I loved so much and decided to start life in a new country. The hardest part is learning English. It is like working with a machine (my brain!) that has been used a lot and then trying to reset it and download a lot of information. My brain is not brand new. But my mind is flexible, and it can grow.

I'm sure that the same flexible mind that helped me to break tradition is going to help me to adapt to this country and to accomplish the goals I set for myself. Since I was a little kid, I've been conscious that life is not a fairy tale, so my prince was not a man. My "prince" was my education. I love to work, to learn, and to teach. I'm not afraid to take on challenges if I see that something better is waiting for me. That is my philosophy of life.



Martha Estela Perez Garcia is a Ysleta Community Learning Center student in El Paso, TX. She has been a professor in Mexico for 16 years and has published some books and papers about violence against women, has participated in academic meetings as a speaker, and wants to work in the education field again in this country one day. She is persistent, collaborative, reflective, creative, and adaptable.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Name a few ways that Martha took leadership in her life and in the life of her family.
2. Martha uses a metaphor when she says, "My 'prince' was my education." What does she mean?



An extended family. Photo from pixabay.com