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What Does Autonomy Mean for Mothers?

Taking the recent proposals to change B.C. laws on child custody and access as a starting point, this paper explores the tensions between a feminist conception of autonomy and modern expectations of mother-caregivers. It does so in the context of social and legal trends favouring shared parenting. Feminists have criticized the individualist version of autonomy at the core of liberalism, instead often emphasizing the significance of relationships. The very relationship between mother-caregivers and children illustrates the connection between relationships and autonomy: the caregiving that mothers provide enables children to become autonomous persons yet this relationship simultaneously constrains maternal autonomy. In the current normative climate, the potential for maternal autonomy is further compromised – even when mothers choose to live apart from a child’s biological father or to parent alone (single mothers by choice). A responsible mother is expected to nurture a child’s relationship with the father, unless he is proven to be harmful. The dominance of the heterosexual and patriarchal family – always a challenge for women’s autonomy – is thereby reproduced. How the legal system can better promote responsible yet autonomous motherhood will be the question asked.

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