

Mother-In-Law From Hell Replaced By Wimp

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The festive season is over. This will come as some relief for many in the older generation of women. Much as they enjoy the family contact, many grandmothers will be just glad they made it through, walking on eggshells, mouths firmly zipped. Our matriarchs, both mothers and mothers-in-law, are on the back foot, nervous of offending the younger generation of women who now rule the roost.

Whatever happened to the mother-in-law from hell? Think of all those jokes about families kowtowing to his mother, families quaking under the firm rule of notoriously strong, interfering harridans. Well, that breed of woman has been replaced by a new wimpy mother-in-law who tiptoes around her son's wife, nervously seeking her place in the family. A more independent breed of daughter-in-law is flexing her muscles, determined to live her own life free from interference by her husband's family. The older woman now treads very carefully.

There's plenty she'd like to say. Talk privately to these older women and you find they are champing at the bit to offer words of wisdom. Child-rearing is a major flashpoint, with many of the younger women bringing up children in ways the other generation feels are quite insane. All that endless demand feeding. Babies and even older children sleeping with their mothers while dad clings to the side of the bed. Infants stuck into child care before they can walk. Children banned from eating dairy, sugar, even a piece of fairy bread, for heaven's sake. And then there's the messy state of the house.

But the grannies have good reason to bite their tongues. The factors which once ensured families preserve relations with their elders are now strained. The financially independent younger generation is no longer nervously holding out for the inheritance and values which once protected the matriarch's position, such as traditional family ties, respect for elders, now count for little. Everywhere there are stories of families becoming estranged, grandparents who spend years barely allowed to see new additions to the family, daughters and daughters-in-law who refuse to allow mothers to visit, even at Christmas.

When contact with precious grandchildren depends on remaining in a daughter-in-law's good graces, the new wimpy mother-in-law stays mum, even when she fears her own son is not being treated fairly. She knows that if that marriage falls apart, our family laws mean control over the children's lives is likely to rest firmly in the younger woman's hands, leaving the older woman on the outer. It's such a tragedy – these experienced older mothers who were once good enough to care for the children for days on end now suddenly are treated as pariahs.

But of course, these changing family relations are not all bad news. New friendships are opening up between the two generations, with some of the older women delighting in seeing their sons whipped into shape by their feisty young wives. Women who spent their lives yearning for their husbands to be more involved in family life are pleased to see their sons manning the prams and making it to school concerts. And while some in the older generation resent the impact of the young women's careers on their family lives, others delight in seeing them grasp the new opportunities available to them.

But what about the men in the middle, the husbands and sons who provide the turf when there is a battlefield between two generations of women? One major reason relations become so strained is that men traditionally have opted out, leaving it to wives and mothers to do the kin-keeping for them. But many young women now are fed up with the refusal of these grown men to nurture their own family relations. They've gone on strike, refusing to make the phone calls to his mother, to send

the photos and buy the presents. Now finally there are more men willing to take care of their own family relations, a trait destined to hold much appeal. Watch how a man treats his mother, they say. Plenty of women are now watching very carefully.

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