

## Motherhood and its discontents

### *The political and ideological grounding of the 21st Century Mothers Movement*

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*The trick is to imagine a world in which citizen's lives integrate wage-earning, caregiving, community activism, political participation, and involvement in the associational life of civil society – while also leaving some time for fun. This world is not likely to come into being in the immediate future. But it is the only imaginable postindustrial world that promises true gender equality. And unless we are guided by this vision now, we will never get any closer to achieving it.*

— Nancy Fraser, 1996

I'd planned to open this presentation by running through the depressingly familiar litany of injustices visited upon mothers. But in the interest of brevity, let's just say that an unfortunate confluence of overt and subtle sex discrimination, entrenched gender norms, ingrained ideologies that assign competing values to the functions of public and private life, political trends, cultural stereotypes, race and class bias, inflexible workplace practices and insufficient or outdated social policies—particularly in the United States—leaves mothers socially, politically and economically marginalized and significantly increases the odds they will experience financial insecurity and diminished well-being over the course of a lifetime. This “perfect storm” of unfavorable economic and social conditions harms all women who mother, but the consequences are most severe for low-income mothers, single parent mothers and mothers of color.

Due to a heightened sensitivity to motherhood as a liability to women's economic security and quality of life, several organizations that facilitate social and educational networks for mothers coping with workforce transitions and parenting issues have reworked their missions to include advocacy and political action on behalf of mothers. (While this presentation focuses on organizations in the U.S., it's important to note that similar groups have formed in both Canada and the UK, including *Mothers Are Women* and *Full-Time Mothers*.)

These would-be mothers' advocates are very clear about what they want: They want mothers to have better lives with less role strain and better options for combining work and family. They want respect and recognition for the social and economic value of mothers' work—both paid employment and the unpaid care work mothers do at home. They want more flexibility in the workplace and they want equal pay for equal work. They want public policies that respond to the needs of dual-earner couples and single parent women, they want reasonable protection from economic hardships mothers may incur due to their maternal status, and they want men to take a more active role in child-rearing and domestic life in general. They would like these things as soon as possible, and they concur that an organized social movement—a broad-based grassroots uprising—will be crucial to achieving this kind of sweeping change. There is less agreement among advocacy groups about why change is necessary. Is it necessary to improve the lives of women? Or is it necessary to improve the lives of children?

Several strands of political philosophy float through the logic and rhetoric of the emerging Mothers Movement. The key variables are whether these different frameworks support or contest the dominant

ideology of the motherhood and whether they serve as useful basis for developing advocacy positions that will advance, rather than obstruct, gender equality. (For this argument, I'm defining the "dominant ideology of motherhood" as the belief that the quality of maternal sensitivity and attachment, *and only that maternal quality*, is directly and integrally related to the ideal growth and development of children, and that undesirable outcomes are inevitable for children whose mothers deviate from socially prescribed norms of mothering.) Frameworks that challenge the dominant ideology of motherhood are attractive because of a growing awareness in popular culture that the idealization of "intensive," selfless mothering detracts from the lived experience of motherhood, isolates fathers from the core of family life, and limits mothers' personal freedom and occupational mobility. Frameworks that align with the dominant ideology of motherhood are politically appealing because they support a plea for better treatment of mothers without posing a serious threat to the status quo. Activists and authors currently involved in the articulation of "mothers' issues" tend to sample from both conforming and non-conforming frameworks to legitimize their demands for social reform. There are any number of philosophies and political theories that feed into the new thinking on motherhood as a social problem, but the three predominant influences are *liberal feminism*, *maternalism* and *feminist care theory*.

**Liberal feminism** challenges the dominant ideology of motherhood and offers a vocabulary of rights, responsibilities, justice, equity, empowerment and identity. This framework is essential to the interpretation of mothers as persons with individual and social rights and responsibilities, and is fundamental to the articulation of mothers' entitlement to self-expression within and beyond the bounds of the maternal role—including self-expression through paid employment or civic engagement, but not excluding a high degree of involvement in child-rearing. Liberal feminism qualifies mothers as equal citizens in an ideally egalitarian society, and justifies the perception of the negative economic and occupational consequences of motherhood as disproportionate and discriminatory. It also provides a context for the strategic separation of the needs and interests of women who mother from the needs and interests of the children they mother. Leading advocates have often referred to the Mothers Movement as "the unfinished business" of feminism.

**Maternalism** conforms to the dominant ideology of motherhood and emphasizes the importance of maternal well-being to the health and safety of children. Maternalism introduces the language of morality and compassion and provides a framework for championing mothers' care work as a precious resource that must be supported, honored and accommodated by private entities and the state. It contrasts the humane values of "the mother world" with the impersonal values of "the money world" and idealizes the power of maternal love to transform the future of children and society as a whole. Maternalism overlaps with what has been called "difference feminism"—particularly the idea that women are "naturally" or intuitively more empathic, less exploitive and more closely attuned to relational ambience than men. Given that maternalist activism has historically concentrated on improving the world for children and concerned itself only incidentally with the status of women, the claim that it should be construed as a true form of feminism remains open to debate. What is undisputed is that during the American Progressive Era (1890-1920), a fierce spirit of maternalism prompted millions of middle-class wives and mothers to organize for social reform. The remarkable historical record of maternalist activism is one of the rationales behind recent campaigns for its revival.

A third—and, I believe, particularly salient—framework for conceptualizing the 21st century Mothers Movement is **feminist care theory**. Feminist care theory is non-conforming to the dominant ideology of motherhood, nor does it conform to the ideology of rational individualism. This framework introduces the language of care as a public good and supports the definition of care as labor—labor that makes an essential and measurable contribution to social and economic growth. Feminist care theory describes maternal care as a process that flows from a deliberate practice rather than emotional impulse, and suggests the cultural understanding of obligation could be reconfigured so that caring for children is allocated as a social responsibility rather than an exclusively maternal duty. The care frame also classifies the need to be "cared for" as a normal, healthy, predictable and ongoing aspect of every

human life rather than a transitory condition affecting only the unusually vulnerable or unnecessarily dependent, and broadens the definition of care so the activity of care-giving becomes something more than what women do for men and children (and, occasionally, each other) out of the spontaneous goodness of their hearts.

To illustrate how these three frameworks blend and mingle in the political construction of mothers' issues, I'll provide a brief overview of the declarations of intent from three groups presently associated with emerging Mothers Movement in the U.S. These examples also reveal critical points of divergence in the articulation of the movement's agenda.

**Mothers & More** (formerly F.E.M.A.L.E.: *Formerly Employed Mothers At the Leading Edge*) was founded in 1987 as a national support group for "women taking time out from full time paid employment in order to raise their children at home." The recently revised mission statement of Mothers & More clarifies an intention to "improve the lives of mothers through support, education and advocacy" and "address the needs of mothers as individuals and members of society, and promote the value of all the work they do." Here, liberal feminism comes into play in recognizing mothers as "individuals" and "members of society," while a claim for the value of "all the work" mothers do—implying both paid employment and unpaid care-giving work—relies on the framework of feminist care theory.

The Mother & More *POWER Plan*, which is the organization's first formal advocacy agenda, elaborates how and why mothers' work should be valued. (In the interest of full disclosure, I'm obligated to mention that I was directly involved in crafting some of the language that appears in the Mothers & More *Power Plan*.) The *Plan* states that "Work needs to be redefined so that there is a broad acceptance that the work of caring for others is valuable and vital work that is essential to our families, communities, economy and society as a whole" and "All the work mothers do – whether paid or unpaid – has social and economic value." Care theory is an obvious influence in the conceptualization of "caring for others" as an expansive public good with "social and economic value," as opposed to a maternalist model that locates the primary value of mothers' work in enhancing the lives of children. In other examples from the Mothers & More *POWER Plan*, the language of individual rights prevails: the *Plan* claims "Mothers have the *right* to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities without incurring social and economic penalties" and "All women deserve recognition for their *right* to choose if and how to combine parenting and paid employment" (emphasis added).

Overall, the Mothers & More *POWER Plan* supports solutions intended to minimize the economic risks faced by mothers who reduce their work schedules or leave the workforce entirely. The needs and interests of mothers who work full-time, including the high proportion of single parent women who work full-time, are not deliberately excluded from the *POWER Plan*, but neither are they over-represented by it. In this regard, the *POWER Plan* lies somewhere between the liberal feminist and maternalist ends of the continuum. As the *Plan* states: "Mothers have always carried the primary responsibility for the care of children. It is time that society provides real options for mothers to carry out that responsibility to the best of their abilities." Here, social change is necessary so that *mothers* can fulfill their care-giving duties more effectively—the purpose of the *POWER Plan* is not to ascertain why mothers have always "carried the primary responsibility for the care of children" or whether they should continue to do so in a better, fairer world. In this example, the maternalist thread wends its way in and through the rhetoric of the *POWER Plan*.

**MOTHERS** (*Mothers Ought To Have Equal Rights*) was founded in 2002 as an initiative of the **National Association of Mothers Centers**. Spearheaded by popular authors Ann Crittenden and Naomi Wolf, MOTHERS endorses an assertive agenda for grassroots activism to "correct the economic disadvantages facing caregivers." Of the unaffiliated collection of groups associated with the birth of the Mothers Movement, MOTHERS is the most politically proactive. The long list of policy and social reforms recognized by the MOTHERS *Economic Empowerment Agenda* includes paid parental leave, a refundable

child tax credit, adding unpaid care-giving labor to the GDP, “guaranteed” flextime and shorter work-weeks for “either or both parents of infants and toddlers,” part-time parity, elimination of the marriage tax penalty, assured child support for all children of divorce, federal guidelines to ensure equity in divorce, universal pre-school, and living wages and professional training for paid care-givers.

The political framework of the *MOTHERS Economic Empowerment Agenda* leans strongly toward liberal feminism, especially through use of the language of rights and the claim that mothers’ well-being hinges on economic empowerment. The organizational structure of MOTHERS—which eschews any form of centralized leadership and might best be described as the “grass-roots groundswell” model—also seeks to recreate the style of political activism epitomized by the heady days of the early Second Wave. Even with this distinctively feminist approach, elements of maternalism surface in MOTHERS’ rhetorical strategy. An introduction to the *Economic Empowerment Agenda*, reads: “America loves its moms and kids. So why shouldn’t American mothers and children have the same economic support that moms and kids do in Britain, Canada, France, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia? The answer is – THEY SHOULD!” Well yes, they should. But this logic seems to overlook the fact that the moms America “loves”—the ones considered as worthy of veneration as the emblematic apple pie—are mothers who readily comply with the dominant ideology of motherhood. While a feminist standpoint is used to rationalize a demand for justice in the *Economic Empowerment Agenda*, the maternalist perspective is used to persuade.

*A Call to A Motherhood Movement* is the maternal manifesto issued by the **Mothers Council**, an informal collaboration of social activists and scholars who support the mission of **The Motherhood Project** of the **Institute for American Values**. This formal statement, which was officially released at a “Symposium on Maternal Feminism” in October 2002, calls upon all mothers to embrace “a new dedication to advocacy and activism to value motherhood and childhood, and, most especially, children.” The *Call to A Motherhood Movement* is an evocative and meticulous document upholding the values of mothering—“the essential ethics of care and nurturance”—as the moral medicine for a society overrun by rampant individualism and the cold-hearted values of commerce.

While the *Call to A Motherhood Movement* does not entirely discard the pursuit of gender equity—the Mothers Council takes no position on the best way to combine child-rearing and paid employment and seeks “to build a movement focused on principles of equal dignity, regard and responsibility between men and women”—it situates the “Motherhood Movement” as parallel to, rather than part of, the ongoing struggle for women’s equality. The goal of such a movement would be a “search for innovative political, economic and cultural strategies that honor and support mothers and enable mothers – and fathers – to spend more time on the vital work of nurturing children.” The transparency of designating care as labor that results in an extended public good—as is seen in the Mothers & More POWER Plan and the MOTHERS Economic Empowerment Agenda—is replaced in the *Call to A Motherhood Movement* by the fuzzier ideal of maternal “nurturing” and “nurturance” as the essential ingredient for tending and mending our broken world. The underlying agenda of the “Motherhood Movement” is, in every way, classically maternalist. Rather than confronting how the dominant ideology of motherhood is used to justify withholding of public and private resources that would allow mothers—and their children—to lead more stable, dignified lives, the *Call to A Motherhood Movement* aspires to gather collective support for the institution of intensive motherhood.

It is noteworthy that the maternalist framework of the *Call to A Motherhood Movement* attacks the ideological construction of individualism for sanctioning the devaluation of women’s care-giving work. Liberal feminism, which borrows heavily from the logic of rational individualism, is not quite so well suited to this task. However, undercurrents of the *Call to A Motherhood Movement* suggest that the war of values assailing American culture can only be won by abandoning, once and for all, the ideal of full social and economic equality for women who mother.

As the previous examples show, the American Mothers Movement is still in the early stages of formation and, at this time, there is no clear unifying cause. The organizations that take a stand on mothers' issues propose a wide range of solutions they believe will help mothers and their families lead better lives, and some of these approaches are more compatible with the egalitarian ideal than others.

In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, Philosopher Joan Tronto writes: "Those who care do understand correctly the value of what they do. That care-givers value care is neither false consciousness nor romantic but a proper reflection of the value of human life" If this is indeed the case, women who mother are uniquely situated to rally behind care as a cause. Even in its most conservative expression, the central issue of the emerging Mothers Movement is *care*—not only the way mothers care for and about their children, but the way we care for all people in our society. The Mothers Movement is about recognizing, respecting and responding to the needs of people who provide care for children and other dependents and how the distribution of care-giving work in our society holds some people back while giving others greater access to power and privilege. It's about the painful disconnect of living in a nation that generates enormous material wealth but fails to provide adequate care for all of its citizens. If there is a common sentiment among the new mother advocates, it is that care matters. The critical points of dissent are *why* care matters, and what to do about it.

A political framework based on a feminist ethic of care will permit the new Mothers Movement to rise beyond the factionalism already developing within it. This is not to suggest that all groups currently involved in mothers' advocacy will be content to relinquish the maternalist point of view for more expansive definitions of care and motherhood. However, a framework of care could resolve some of the underlying conflicts in the movement as it is presently articulated. The care frame favors gender equity by promoting the status of care without valorizing maternal care-giving. It positions the need for care as a normal, healthy, predictable and ongoing aspect of every human life, and represents women's care-giving experience as broadly normative rather than peripheral to the social order. A framework of care could undermine the dominant ideology of motherhood by relocating responsibility for all kinds of care—including attending to the needs of children—to the whole of society and all the people in it, and challenges the myth of individualism and the legitimacy of the "ideal worker" model by questioning whether the idealized conditions of autonomy and self-determination are desirable, or even possible, in a habitable society. Care theory ties the devaluation of care to the social and economic marginalization of mothers and other care-givers, but avoids maternalist logic; it provides a new focal point for explaining who wins and who loses in our society, and why. A framework of care holds out the hope of something better than "parity" for women in the public and private spaces of social life.

The Mothers Movement could play an important role instilling this enlightened vision of care and care work in the public mind. While writers such as Nel Noddings (1984) and Sara Ruddick (1983) have relied on the mother-child dyad to illustrate exemplary forms of care, Tronto's definition of care (1994) is especially adaptable for neutralizing cultural presumptions about the gendered nature of care work. By defining care as an activity that "includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible," Tronto acknowledges that care work involves not just the intentions and actions of men and women who are moved to care for other people; it includes caring for the things that surround us. Caring for children and other family members becomes part of a deliberate practice of maintaining and continuing "our world" rather than a contained private act ending with the individual who receives care. The inclusion of activities such as doing laundry, sweeping the floor, and changing a flat tire in the definition of "care" accentuates just how much care goes into keeping our world in working condition. Most importantly for proponents of a Mothers Movement, Tronto's definition of care counters the predominant ideological construction of care-giving as an intuitive feminine (or maternal) response.

The principal dilemma of adopting a framework of care for the Mothers Movement is the danger of alienating mothers who are not yet willing to exchange the dominant ideology of motherhood—or the moral veneration they receive for doing “the most important job in the world”—for a genderless ethic of care that leaves the social and emotional roles of women who mother less distinct. But in order to relocate care as the central concern of human life, it will first be necessary to emancipate care-giving from its secondary status as women’s work. To this end, the fundamental project of a Mothers Movement based on a framework of care will be the reinvention of motherhood.

Considering how well fortified the dominant ideology of motherhood is against intrusion from incompatible ideals, this seems like an impossible task. Yet this formidable work is already underway. Mothers are already laboring under considerable ideological strain, and many are aware that a portion of their distress can be ascribed to the fair share of care-giving work left undone by men. Today, new authors and activists encourage women to recognize and reject idealized representations of mothers and mothering while urging mothers to experience their discontent as the product of systemic, rather than personal, failure.

To reach the tipping point, a Mothers Movement will need to initiate an open discourse about the new future of motherhood—what will the lives of men, women and children look like when tending and mending the world for others is no longer the particular duty of mothers? Central to this consciousness raising effort will be reaffirming that socializing care is not intended to relegate women and their children to a loveless world where care-giving is managed and delivered exclusively by the state. However, it’s quite possible that “mother love” will acquire a different meaning in the lives of women who mother—perhaps a more fluid and authentic meaning—in a society governed by an ethic of care. A Mothers Movement guided by a framework of care will invite women to search beyond the dominant ideology of motherhood and imagine what their lives might look and feel like in a more equitable and caring society. ★

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