

An interview with Enola Aird

The Director of the Motherhood Project at the Institute for American Values shares her insights with the MMO

Enola G. Aird is an activist mother. After leaving the practice of law to devote her time and energies to her children, Enola learned first-hand the extent to which mothering is devalued in the United States. This led her to a new calling as an activist mother, committed to fighting for the best of all possible worlds for children and the mothers and fathers who raise them.

Enola is an Affiliate Scholar at the Institute for American Values in New York City where she established and directs the Motherhood Project and serves as convener of the Project's Mothers' Council, a group of mothers of diverse backgrounds and perspectives "committed to protecting the integrity of children and the dignity of childhood and motherhood". The mission of the Motherhood Project is to foster "a renewed sense of purpose, passion, and power in the vocation of mothering in both the private and public spheres." The Project seeks to promote "a deeper appreciation for the contributions mothers make to children and to society, and to bring fresh knowledge to bear to help mothers meet the challenges of raising children in an age driven by the values of commerce and technology."

Enola is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Barnard College and received her law degree from Yale University. During the mid-1990s, Enola worked at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C., directing its violence prevention program and serving as acting director of its Black Community Crusade for Children.

She was appointed by Governors O'Neill and Weicker to the Connecticut Commission on Children and elected Chair by its members. She serves on the board of directors and the executive committee of the National Parenting Association, where she is also an adviser to its Task Force on Revitalizing Parenting for the 21st Century.

Enola has appeared in a variety of media including Face The Nation, The News Hour, The O'Reilly Factor, and other shows on Fox News Channel, CNN, and MSNBC. She has published articles in periodicals as diverse as "The Wall Street Journal", "Theology Today", and "Parenting" magazine and contributed chapters to several edited publications, most recently, "Taking Parenting Public: The Case for A New Social Movement", edited by Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Nancy Rankin, and Cornel West. She is currently at work on a book entitled "Militant Mothering".

MMO: A statement on the Motherhood Project Web site emphasizes the need to spark a "mother's renaissance". Using the term "renaissance" implies a sort of revival – do you believe there has been a time in American history when mothers were better off, or had more social and economic influence, than they do today?

EA: Actually, the term "mothers' renaissance" was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, which certainly did not imply that there had ever been a time in American history when black people were better off or had more influence. It was rather a time of great flowering, of new thinking about the potential, possibilities, and power of the black community. In a similar vein, the Motherhood Project seeks to provide intellectual resources and create opportunities for exchange to help spark a "mothers' renaissance"— fresh, creative thinking about the potential, possibilities, and power of the community of mothers.

Through mothers' statements, appeals, and reports as well as symposia and other gatherings, we are working to promote discussion and activism by mothers about motherhood and mothering – about who mothers are, what we do, what we need and want, our importance to our children, families, and society, and our potential as catalysts for cultural and social change. Our goal is not to tell mothers what to think, but to create opportunities for mothers to grapple for themselves with these fundamental questions.

We seek to help generate new wisdom for mothering in the 21st century, an era that will be driven by the values of commerce and technology, values that are often very much at odds with the values necessary to support mothers and the work of mothering.

MMO: What role does a ‘mother’s renaissance’ play in the contemporary movement to improve social and economic conditions for mothers?

EA: The Motherhood Project wants to help bring an end to our culture’s devaluing of mothers and mothers’ work and we are fully committed to helping build a movement aimed at improving social and economic conditions for mothers. We believe that a mothers’ renaissance will contribute to the movement by helping to bring into the conversation a broad range of mothers’ voices to refine current thinking and generate new ideas for initiatives and policies to value and support mothers.

MMO: How did you become involved in the formation of the Motherhood Project at the Institute for American Values, and later the Mother’s Council?

EA: I am a lawyer by training. When I withdrew from the paid workforce to take care of my children in the mid 1980’s, my life changed dramatically. In my professional life, I had been valued. In my life as a mother, I was not. I learned first-hand of the extent to which mothers, mothering, and children are devalued in this society. I was deeply troubled by the fact that our national conversation about mothering was limited to divisive, media- driven “mommy wars.” I wanted to find a way to help move the conversation forward – to consider a deeper, more important set of questions that might have the potential of bringing mothers together to work to change conditions for themselves and their children.

Taking mothers’ freedom and the gains of the women’s movement as givens, I wanted to be part of constructing a national conversation that would bring forth new visions and ideas for valuing and empowering mothers, supporting the work of mothering, and mobilizing mothers for the benefit of mothers, children, and families. And I wanted to bring together, in a Mothers’ Council, a group of mothers of diverse backgrounds and political and ideological points of view to take on this challenge and build coalitions with mothers’ groups across the country.

The Institute, which has a record of convening people of diverse viewpoints to address issues affecting children, families, and civil society, offered me a base of operations and the absolute freedom to set off in whatever directions seemed to make sense in light of our mission and objectives.

MMO: Most of the activities and research initiated by the Motherhood Project might be described as child centered – they’ve focused on what we need to do, as parents and a society, to shield the nation’s children from harmful influences and protect the integrity of our families. In fact, the URL of your main Web site is “watchoutforchildren.org”. How is this related to your thinking around mothers’ issues?

EA: The Motherhood Project and the Mothers’ Council are concerned with both mothers’ rights and children’s needs. In the *Call to a Motherhood Movement*, a mothers’ statement issued by the Council last October, we urged mothers to “move boldly to change the conditions under which we mother and under which our children are living.”

We recognize that some mothers will want to focus on mothers’ rights, some will want to devote their energies to addressing children’s needs, and others will prefer an approach that combines the two concerns. There is more than enough work for all of us.

It will take a great deal of energy, resources, and good thinking to build this movement and we believe that it is best that we try, where possible, to help and support each other, and look for ways to collaborate.

MMO: Do you believe there is any potential conflict between promoting the needs of children for a safe and secure family life and promoting mothers' rights to full social and economic citizenship?

EA: I hope there will not be any irreconcilable conflicts. The challenge for all who are concerned with improving conditions for mothers and for children is to build a movement that goes beyond an individualistic, interest-group politics pitting mothers' interests against children's needs.

The Motherhood Project wants to point to something admittedly harder (but ultimately, bolder and grander), that recognizes the interconnectedness of mothers and children and members of families, and seeks to recalibrate the values and priorities of our society so that mothers, children, and families get all that they need in order to flourish.

MMO: What is the relationship between the Motherhood Project and the Mothers' Council? What is the mission of the Mothers' Council, and how is it currently expressed?

EA: The Mothers' Council advises the Motherhood Project, examines matters affecting mothers, motherhood, and the work of mothering, and builds coalitions with mothers' groups across the country, and increasingly, the world.

Among the key objectives of the Council is the preparation and dissemination of mothers' statements, appeals, and reports (such as *Watch Out for Children: A Mothers' Statement to Advertisers* and *Call to a Motherhood Movement*) designed to add mothers' voices to the public debate and promote vigorous "mother-informed" national conversations.

MMO: How were the members of the Mothers' Council recruited?

EA: Our goal in convening the Council was to bring together mothers of diverse races, backgrounds, and points of view, all of whom shared a willingness to listen to and reason with one another to find common ground. We wanted to identify mothers willing to move beyond the easy "with us or against us" attitude that prevails today in discussions of ideas and policies to search for solutions of broad appeal.

We sought mothers who were committed to raising the voices and the visibility of mothers and who believed that mothers' interests and children's needs need not be seen as mutually exclusive.

MMO: In October 2002, the Mothers' Council released a founding document, "Call to A Motherhood Movement". Do you feel there is a difference between the Council's concept of a "motherhood movement" and the "mothers movement" that has energized advocacy organizations such as the National Association of Mother's Centers (the Mothers Ought To Have equal Rights initiative) and Mothers & More?

EA: The Call to a Motherhood Movement was explicit in calling for a movement to value, support, and extend equal rights to mothers. We very much want to be a part of the search for initiatives and proposals that would dramatically improve social and economic conditions for mothers. We would go further, however, to work to put "mothers' concerns about children and nurturing at the top of the national agenda."

We want to create a movement that goes beyond the "work and family" debate to a more far-reaching "culture and family" debate. We want to see our culture transformed so that the values that currently dominate our lives - radical individualism, relentless competition, and materialism - yield enough room for the values necessary for nurturing human beings and developing human relationships, values such as caring, nurturing, and connectedness.

We do not expect that mothers' groups will agree on everything, but we want to help build a movement that is broad-based and collaborative, and we are committed to working, when we can, with MOTHER, Mothers & More, and other mothers' organizations.

MMO: In 2002, you organized a one-day Symposium on Maternal Feminism in NYC, which was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the founding of NOW. Women's historians generally view "maternalism" – women's social activism to improve the welfare children and families – and "feminism" – women's political activism to secure equal rights – as separate, and sometimes conflicting, strains of women's political engagement. How do you see these disparate philosophies blending in the contemporary movement to advance the status of mothers?

EA: A key objective of the symposium on maternal feminism was to create a forum for mothers to reflect upon and learn from the lessons of history, as we embark on a 21st century movement to advance the status of mothers. We wanted to help minimize the chances of a maternalist/feminist divide in the contemporary motherhood/mothers' movement by recalling the history of the women's movement.

Mothers were a vital part of the early women's movement and many "maternalists" worked side by side with "equal rights feminists." As we noted in the Call to a Motherhood Movement, equal rights for women and support for nurturing and for women who wish to be nurturers need not be at odds. Our goal is to help build a 21st century motherhood/mothers' movement that will "move us all forward, building on the gains of the women's movement to extend equal rights to mothers and put mothers' concerns about children and nurturing at the top of the national agenda."

MMO: A number of feminist historians have argued that the maternalist reform agenda during the late 19th and early 20th century had negative consequences for mothers who were already disadvantaged by social conditions, in that policy solutions endorsed by maternalist social reformers served to institutionalize middle-class ideals about women's appropriate roles in the family and in society. Several scholars have suggested that the well-being of working class and immigrant mothers, and mothers of color, was actually reduced by some of the public policies and cultural attitudes promoted by maternalist reformers. How will a new agenda for maternal/feminist activism avoid similar negative outcomes?

EA: As a Black woman, I am keenly aware of the racial and class limitations of the maternalist reform movements, as well as the equal rights movement, for that matter. That is why we have taken such pains – and will continue to work hard – to build a diverse Mothers' Council and reach out to and listen to the voices of a wide variety of mothers' groups across the country.

It is also one reason why we are undertaking a national study of the attitudes, values, concerns, and needs of mothers in the United States. This comprehensive study will combine focus groups with mothers throughout the country and in-depth telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of mothers.

We will pay particular attention to the needs and concerns of mothers of color, single mothers, and mothers in immigrant, low income, and working poor families. This study will broaden and deepen our collective understanding of mothers' priorities and concerns to help identify community initiatives, and private and public policies that would best address the diversity of needs of mothers across the socio-economic spectrum.

MMO: You've stated that our society needs to realign so that the values of "the mother world" – care, connection and nurturing – are given greater priority. In practice, what would this look like?

EA: As things now stand, our societal priorities are determined almost exclusively by the forces of what sociologist Robert Bellah calls the “money world”— work, immediate gratification, speed, the profit motive, self-interest, and materialism. These are the forces telling us and our children who we are and what matters most in life— getting good grades to get good jobs to work harder and harder to buy more and more things.

This is a culture which increasingly treats people as means to ends rather than ends in and of themselves. It is a shallow “work and consume” culture in which we spend more and more time as workers and consumers and less and less time as mothers, fathers, family members, neighbors, and citizens. We and our children are working harder, getting less sleep, reserving less time for leisure and family and civic life.

We have to find ways to redefine success so that it does not mean how hard we work, how much money we have, and how much we can buy. It must mean that we use the money we have to take better care of ourselves, our children, our families, our elders, and our neighbors, including the people of our forgotten urban and rural communities who need our help.

A recalibration of the values of the money world and the mother world would mean that, as a society, we would work to live instead of live to work. To begin with, it would mean that we would be less rushed, that our personal and family lives would not be crowded into increasingly smaller and smaller spaces in our days. It would mean, for example, much more time for the hard work of forging and nurturing relationships, passing on traditions, and teaching our children the values that will help them be good friends and neighbors, good mothers and fathers. It would mean that we had rearranged the priorities of our society to treat people as ends in themselves, not as means or instruments to other more important ends.

MMO: Do you believe only mothers have an inherent capacity to foster human growth through relationship and a shared ethic of care, or do you imagine that this is something everyone in our society should be actively involved in?

EA: Ideally, everyone in society should be actively involved in fostering human growth and development. We believe that mothers are important voices in favor of a recalibration of the values of our society because our work as mothers helps us see and understand in concrete ways every day what it takes to help children flourish and what it takes to nourish and develop human relationships.

MMO: Are you calling for a return of mothers in the paid workforce to the traditional role of unpaid caregiving in the home?

EA: No.

I have been in the paid workforce, I have worked at home full time with my children, I have worked in the paid work force from home. I believe that mothers should be free to make their own decisions about whether to stay at home to care for their children or enter or stay in the paid work force.

We must, however, find concrete ways to honor and support mothers and enable mothers — as well as fathers — to spend more time on the vital work of caring for and nurturing children.

MMO: The Institute for American Values has a reputation for taking a conservative line on family issues. Sociologist Scott Coltrane, who studies fatherhood issues, has described the Institute's founder, David Blankenhorn, as a "defender of traditional fatherhood" who presents "a clear picture of men's limited capacity for direct care, and not incidentally, their inherent suitability for leadership" as the head of the family. This position conflicts with feminist ideals for equality within marriage, since it implies the appropriateness of male/dominant and female/subordinate roles within married couples and the gendered division of caring labor. Is the Institute's ideology about fatherhood reflected in your conceptualization of a motherhood movement?

EA: Mr. Coltrane is wrong. I know that David Blankenhorn believes in equality within marriage.

The Call to a Motherhood Movement expressly called for a movement "founded on principles of equal dignity, regard, and responsibility between men and women, mothers and fathers."

In any case, happily, the Institute does not require those associated with it to think in the same way or reach any particular conclusions. We think for ourselves, and the Motherhood Project and the Mothers' Council develop their positions independent of the positions of other Institute initiatives.

MMO: The Institute also has a strong pro-marriage agenda. Maggie Gallagher, author of "The Case for Marriage" and an Institute associate, was interviewed for a recent report on the mothers' movement for the "Congressional Quarterly Researcher" (April 3, 2003). Gallagher was quoted as saying "the 'gratitude' wives feel when their husbands' earnings permit them to stay a home is a crucial ingredient in the glue that keeps couples together and produces strong families". I was personally offended by the tone of Gallagher's remarks, which I interpreted as conservative backlash against feminist attitudes about equality in marriage and the legitimacy of diverse family forms. In any case, the reciprocal 'gratitude' a husband feels for his wife's contribution of unpaid care work would presumably have an equally adhesive quality. Is there any aspect of the Institute's pro-marriage agenda that informs the work of the Motherhood Project/Mother's Council? How do the needs and rights of single parent women and their children fit into the Motherhood Project/Mother's Council's social agenda?

EA: Again, Institute affiliates are not required to agree with each other, and in this case, I do not concur with Ms. Gallagher.

The Motherhood Project and the Mothers' Council develop positions for themselves, independent of the positions taken by other Institute projects.

I personally happen to believe (and a growing body of evidence supports the view) that strong, healthy marriages are good for children. But I am intent on sparking a mothers' renaissance for all mothers. I am therefore committed to making sure that the voices and concerns of single mothers are included in all aspects of the work of the Project and Council.

MMO: What is the next step for your organization? What do you hope to accomplish, and do you have a time frame?

EA: Our next major step is a national study of the attitudes, values, concerns, and needs of mothers.

This comprehensive original research study will enable us to listen to the voices of mothers, who are, as author Naomi Wolf has put it, the "frontline" workers for children. This study will provide much-needed insights on the state of mind of mothers and the state of motherhood in the United States today, and it will help inform the development of both the mothers' and the motherhood movements.

A major product of this initiative will be a report to the nation which will include a discussion guide to help deepen the national conversation and debate about mothers, mothering, and motherhood. The report and discussion guide will be widely disseminated and used to inform and inspire local and national action aimed at increasing support for mothers and the vital work that mothers do.

Current plans call for the report to be released in 2005.

MMO: If there are mothers who are interested in supporting your current projects or future ones, how can they become involved?

EA: Mothers are welcome to contact us directly through our web site www.watchoutforchildren.org

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