Morality or equality?
Maternal thinking and the social agenda

“If we mothers agree that things aren’t the way we’d like them to be, we owe it to our kids to make a change”

– Enola Aird, Director of the Motherhood Project, as quoted in The Ladies’ Home Journal, May 2003

1. “For many generations it has been believed that woman’s place is within the walls of her own home, and it is indeed impossible to imagine the time when her duty there shall be ended or to forecast any social change which shall release her from that paramount obligation... if woman would keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children, she will have to have some conscience in regard to public affairs lying outside of her immediate household. The individual conscience and devotion are no longer effective.”

– Jane Addams, Why Women Should Vote, 1917 (1)

86 years after the publication of her essay imploring American mothers to apply their maternal sensitivity to the ballot box, Jane Addams’s reflections on the perpetuity of women’s “paramount obligation” to home and family may be viewed as either archaic or prophetic. Perhaps Addams could not foresee the churning of social forces in the latter half of the 20th century that led to such a dramatic shift in attitudes about women’s right to equality in both private and public life. However, when it comes to women’s primacy in the matter of care work, Addams was dead on — we’ve yet to witness a meaningful transformation of our cultural understanding about who, precisely, owns the “duty” of attending to the health and well-being of our nation’s children and families. Today, as in Addams’s day, we rely on mothers — above all others — to perform this indispensable social function.

The asymmetry of who takes responsibility for care in our society — and the multiple consequences that flow from that imbalance — are compelling factors in mothers’ latest quest for social change. Beyond that, the philosophy that drives the contemporary mothers movement is the product of a cultural climate that mingles the heady ambitions of the women’s rights agenda with a popular idealization of motherhood and family life that harks back to Jane Addams’s time. This situation will inevitably lead to friction as movement organizers work to build a broad coalition of supporters. One of the biggest ideological hurdles ahead for the mothers movement can be summed up by a single question: If we adhere to the notion that mothers make their most critical contribution to society by putting the needs of children and family before the fulfillment of their individual interests, is it moral for mothers to demand social justice on their own behalf?

2. Jane Addams was at the forefront of a Progressive Era (1890 – 1920) social movement to improve the health, education and welfare of American children - a chapter of women-led activism historians describe as the maternalist movement. Under the banner of “social housekeeping”, professional reformers — including Addams, Florence Kelley and Julia Lathrop — inspired millions of middle-class wives and mothers to concentrate their civic energies on lobbying for a cleaner, safer, more humane world.

Addams and her colleagues were intent on propagating a new political meaning for motherhood based on cultural ideology that championed the emotional and social value of women’s attachment to children and family. As men’s public interactions became increasingly defined by the impersonal conditions of market competition and waged work, women were venerated for safeguarding the moral
outposts of charity, compassion and care. The maternalist reform ethic emanated from the popular notion that women—and most particularly mothers—were uniquely qualified to set their hands and hearts to righting the wrongs of an uncaring society. To maternalist activists, the gateway to women’s political empowerment lay not in breaching the status quo of male dominance, but in engaging women’s sentimental fervor regarding the innocence and vulnerability of children.

Rapid industrialization and urbanization during the second half of the 19th century generated a host of social ills that captured the attention of maternalist reformers, including urban poverty, the unchecked spread of communicable disease, exploitation of child labor, and high rates of infant mortality. By organizing through a nation-wide network of voluntary groups and social clubs, maternalist reformers coordinated a number of successful campaigns for policy reform that included pensions for abandoned and destitute mothers, reduced work hours for women, improved health and safety conditions for women workers, the establishment of a separate juvenile justice system, pure food and drug regulations, laws restricting child labor, compulsory school attendance, public kindergartens and the institution of a nationwide program to reduce infant mortality and promote child health.

Women’s individual and legal rights were not a high priority for the rank and file of the maternalist reform movement (which included members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, the National Congress of Mothers, and the National Consumer’s League, among others) and reform leaders initially encountered resistance to their commitment to supporting women’s suffrage as part of the maternalist agenda. Maternalism—as practiced by early 20th century reformers—was not a fundamentally egalitarian philosophy. Its power to mobilize millions of homemakers was based on spinning the cultural zeitgeist about women’s devotion to preserving the sanctity of the home into a greater and more glorious cause.

Feminist historians have argued that public policies and social services derived from the maternalist reform ethic operated to institutionalize white, middle-class standards of family life, which directly disadvantaged mothers from working-class families and those of color. For example, records indicate that the distribution of mother’s pensions (the precursor of Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and decisions to remove minor children from “unfit” homes were strongly biased against families of color, and that mothers in impoverished families were frequently excoriated by social service workers for seeking paid employment outside the home. (2)

In codifying cultural attitudes that restricted women’s social agency to matters of hearth and home, maternalist activities ultimately reinforced the secondary political and economic status of all women. The maternalist ethic also prescribed culturally and economically appropriate behavior for fathers—men were expected to go forth and earn a sufficient wage to support their dependent families. Key social programs in the U.S.—which are still predominantly designed to protect the economic security of the traditional breadwinner/homemaker household—can be viewed as a product of trickle-down from the maternalist mentality of the early 20th century.

By 1920, nationally-coordinated maternalist activism had experienced a significant decline. However, prominent women continued to support a social reform agenda shaped by maternalist thinking, most notably Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, who during her tenure as FDR’s Secretary of Labor crafted both the Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act.(3)

3.
Maternalist ideologues believed that transporting the ideal qualities of motherhood—care, nurture, and compassion—to the civic agenda would counteract the indifference and corruption of commercial interests. In the present day, we still to look to women to warm up the cold edges of modern life. In the workplace, we depend on women to infuse the competitive business model with the values of connection and cooperation. On the home front, women continue to bear the standard of “expressive”
leadership - the art of putting words to feelings and sustaining the familial and social bonds that enrich intimate life. Mothers are called upon to act out the receptive side of human relationship — tenderness, patience, sharing, empathy, tolerance — as part of their daily routine. And as far as the future of America is concerned, our society — with very few exceptions — still counts on mothers to serve as the enlightened custodians of the next generation of lawful and productive citizens.

The power of mother love still delivers substantial political clout. In recent years, maternalist thinking has been used to build momentum for a broad spectrum of social causes, including gun control, hazardous waste, drunk driving, preventing sexual predation of children, environmental protection, restricting pesticide use, curing chronic disease, expanding access to mental health treatment, restricting children’s access to offensive pop music, reducing sex and violence in the media, and working for world peace. While individual campaigns typically draw supporters with a specific self-interest or outlook, they all share a common goal — to eradicate or control a potential source of harm to children. (4)

Agitating for services and legislation to protect the health and safety of children and the world they will inherit is not only worthy — it is necessary, particularly in a wealthy nation that has demonstrated an astonishing disregard for the welfare of its youngest citizens.(5) And it is undeniable that the well-being of individual mothers can be tragically and irreversibly altered by the preventable harms and random accidents that befall children; the mobilizing potential of maternalism rests not so much on a commonly-held ethic of care as it does on every mothers’ ability to imagine the psychological devastation of child loss. But maternalist ideology also relies on the culture-bound assumption that the public and private actions of socially responsible mothers are in all ways care-driven and child-centric; this leaves little room for the acceptance of any alternative ideology that suggests the full and normal experience of motherhood involves much more than a preoccupation with tending and mending the world for someone else.

In its most conservative representation, the maternalist ethic refuses to suffer any intrusion of a mother’s identity into her commitment to activism — unless a mother’s identity happens to be single-mindedly directed toward serving others. This exaltation of selfless motherhood as a political tool is singularly blatant in a 2002 book written by Jacqueline Horor Plumez, PhD, Mother Power: Discover the Difference That Women Have Made All Over the World. (6) Plumez’s primary subjects are mothers who have valiantly transformed their personal hardship into a successful campaign for social progress — which is all well and good; the personal fortitude of some of the activists profiled in Mother Power is genuinely inspiring. However, the author makes it patently clear that tapping into “mother power” depends on the complete suppression of the needs and interest of the mother as an individual. (7)

Maternalism uplifts the routine sacrifices and emotional investment of motherhood to a higher moral plane — a strategy that gives women both the personal courage and collective authority to branch out as social actors on the political stage. But a growing group of contemporary mothers insist they are entitled to a life that is not entirely defined by selfless service — that they are not just mothers, but women too, who have every right to the opportunities and responsibilities of full citizenship. Can a maternalist agenda possibly tolerate this upstart perspective of motherhood and social justice?

4.

On October 29, 2002, the Barnard College Center for Research on Women co-sponsored a half-day symposium billed as ‘Maternal Feminism: Lessons for a 21st Century Motherhood Movement’: The event — which was hubristically scheduled to fall on the anniversary of the founding of NOW — was organized by Enola Aird, Director of the Motherhood Project at the Institute for American Values, a conservative think tank and research group concerned with reversing the decline of marriage and the traditional family.

In addition to a panel discussion highlighted by a mildly contentious exchange between Kim Gandy, president of NOW, and Sylvia Ann Hewlett, the author of A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women’s Liberation in America, (8) the symposium was used as a forum to roll out the Motherhood Project’s formal
manifesto, the Call To A Motherhood Movement. “We, women who nurture and care for children, we who mother, call all mothers to a renewed sense of purpose, passion, and power in the work of mothering” reads the opening statement of the Call. “We call mothers to a new commitment to building a movement aimed at honoring and supporting mothers and mothering... We call for a motherhood movement to ensure the dignity and well-being of children.”

Both the impassioned rhetoric of the Call to A Motherhood Movement and its focus on recruiting mothers for political activism to promote the welfare of children are classically maternalist in approach. This is understandable, for both Aird and The Motherhood Project have a history of commitment to children's advocacy; Aird is the former director of the Children's Defense Fund’s Violence Prevention Campaign and previously served as the acting director of the CDF’s Black Community Crusade for Children; in 2001 The Motherhood Project launched a national protest of product advertising targeted to children.

Aird and her colleagues on the Mothers' Council (an informal group consisting of signatories of the Call to A Motherhood Movement) invoke the familiar dichotomy of public indifference/private compassion by delineating the contrast between the values of “the money world” —a heartless landscape of uncontrolled materialism and individualistic greed—and “the mother world”: an insulated comfort zone of care, commitment and connection. The Call does stress the importance of mothers’ rights and favors equality between men and women in both public and private spheres, but social action to improve conditions for children and families is its central concept.

Members of the Mothers' Council are not alone among mothers' advocates who associate the essential incompatibility of the uncompromising interests of free market individualism and the fluid reality of human feeling and need with the contemporary motherhood problem.(9) However, the subtext of the Call to a Motherhood Movement also seems to suggest that mothers have a superior claim to the moral capital of care and compassion. By identifying the emotional and relational priorities of intimate life as part of “the mother world”, The Mothers' Council implies that mothers have a more developed sensibility with which to rescue our society from the post-modern scourge of capitalism gone wrong. To incorporate a less gendered agenda into the platform for a “motherhood” movement, we must begin by asking mothers and others to enter into a serious dialog about why the boundaries between “the money world” and “the mother world” are so culturally and politically durable.

5.
As a dominant philosophy to guide the 21st century mothers' movement, maternalism has a certain degree of surface appeal —it represents motherhood as a socially and politically significant role and places a high value on the everyday work of mothering. By accentuating the importance of mothers' attachment to children and family and transmuting the strength of the emotional experience of motherhood into a larger social cause, maternalism also offers an option for political activism that need not actively challenge the agents of mother's personal discontent.(10) In its unadulterated form, maternalism is only concerned with the well-being of women insofar as they are the mothers, or potential mothers, of at-risk children.

The social dilemmas that confront the current generation of mother activists are markedly different than those that galvanized Progressive Era maternalists. Issues of public health and child mortality, although still problematic, are not nearly as severe as they were in the first decades of the 20th century. The instability of modern marriage, the stagnation of wages, the widening wealth gap, the changing corporate climate, the entry of mothers of young children into the paid workforce and the prevalence of racial and gender discrimination have created a full slate of problems that will — realistically — require a considerable investment of time, money and policy-making to resolve.

The categories of policy reform under discussion by proponents of the new mothers movement are utterly susceptible to the traditional maternalist model that portrays mothers’ disproportionate respon-
sibility for child-rearing and homemaking as the combined result of women’s personal preference and the natural social order. Depending on how legislation is conceptualized, provisions for paid parental leave and part-time parity could improve options for balancing work and family without substantially alleviating the conditions that marginalize mothers in the first place. Social Security credits for mothers who take extended time out of the workforce to care for young children might reduce rates of women’s poverty in old age without adequately addressing the complex interplay of cultural and economic factors that contribute to women’s financial insecurity over the course of a lifetime. Unless contemporary mothers’ activists keep the goal of women’s equality squarely in their sights, “family-friendly” policies will only function as a superficial overlay to a social structure based on devaluing care work and those who do it.

A maternalistic mothers’ movement may be most attractive to mothers who are eager to improve the world but who are not yet prepared to probe the cultural and political context of their personal experience. The sticky questions about why our society expects so much of mothers and low-wage workers when it comes to caring for others — and so little of everyone else — or how the obligations of care limit women’s freedom of choice need not be answered to advance the maternalist agenda. Mothers want public recognition for their role in the socially important work of child-rearing, and few mothers would resent a proposal to do some collective good on behalf of children anywhere or everywhere. But framing mothers’ issues by politicizing their attachment to children runs the risk of undermining mothers’ demands for social and economic equality in their own right. We don’t just owe it to our kids to make social change – we owe it to ourselves.

6.
For good or ill, feminist thinking about motherhood and family has not been especially consistent or clear cut. (11) The focus of the Second Wave agenda on progressing women’s status by opening opportunities to paid employment has come under fire from both liberal and conservative critics for underestimating the significance of women’s care work both as a life experience and as a resilient barrier to gender equity.(12) Lingering objections based on theoretical disputes about the validity of “difference” feminism also feed the reluctance of mothers’ advocates to design their new movement around the standard feminist philosophy. (13)

Reservations aside, the feminist conviction that women’s capacity for personal and political empowerment is inherently separate from any specific, culturally-determined role — such as “worker”, “wife” or “mother” — has provided an invaluable framework for interpreting the political and cultural context of the social and economic marginalization of mothers and the devaluation of care work.

But the nagging moral question continues to pressure the formulation of an activist agenda based on mothers’ rights and responsibilities. Even those who reject the valorization of selfless motherhood as a smokescreen for the exclusion of women from the true locus of power are subjects of a culture that continues to define self-interest and motherhood as manifestly irreconcilable. The desire for a life that allows for the full expression of one’s identity and ability — with all the self-centered and urgent cravings that normally entails — is still considered the height of unmotherliness. The overriding implication is that a woman can have a life of her own, or she can have children — but not both.

It may cause less discomfiture – for individual mothers and society as a whole - to take a stand that couples the welfare of mothers to the welfare of children, and children and mothers may indeed live in a better world as a result of maternalist thinking. But a child-centric approach to a mothers movement is inadequate to untangle the messy knot of the 21st century motherhood problem; to achieve that end, we must cultivate an understanding that it is right and moral for mothers to own and actualize a self-concept that is not exclusively dependent on the attachment to children and family.

—Judith Stadtman Tucker, June 2003
Morality or Equality? Maternal thinking and the social agenda
by Judith Stadtman Tucker
June 2003
The Mothers Movement Online

Republication or distribution for fee is prohibited without prior permission.
Please address all inquiries to: editor@mothersmovement.org

Notes

(1) Why Women Should Vote, Jane Addams, from the “The Blue Book”; women’s suffrage, history, arguments and results, Frances Maule, editor, 1917. The adaptation of maternalist rhetoric by suffrage activists offers an interesting opportunity to examine the philosophical contrast between the maternalist agenda and that of early women’s rights supporters. Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s Seneca Falls Declaration (Declaration of Sentiments, 1848) makes no reference to any relationship between the demand for women’s rights and the social significance of the maternal role. In an 1892 address before the Committee of the Judiciary of the United States Congress, Stanton proclaimed: “it is only the incidental relations of life, such as mother, wife, sister, daughter, that may involve some special duties… In the usual discussion in regard to women's sphere, such as men… uniformly subordinate her rights and duties as an individual, as a citizen, as a woman, to the necessities of these incidental relations… In discussing the sphere of man we do not decide his rights as an individual, as a citizen, as a man by his duties as a father, a husband, a brother or a son”. But by the late 1910s, even the more radical factions of the women’s rights movement had co-opted maternal imagery to further their cause, and posters supporting women’s enfranchisement were printed with illustrations of adorably plump babies urging “votes for our mothers”.


(3) For more about the connection the influence of maternalist ideology and New Deal policy, see William H. Chafe’s The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century, 1991.

(4) In her essay on the Million Mom March for The Nation, Katha Pollit writes: “Under the rubric of maternalism, women can fight for kids but not for themselves. Thus there was no mention at the march of the thousands of women killed and injured each year with guns.” Moms to NRA: Grow Up!, June 2000.

(5) Rates of child poverty and infant mortality in the U.S. are the highest of all wealthy nations. Of course, children do not live in poverty because they lack access to good jobs with good pay; they live in poverty because their mothers lack access to jobs with good pay, and/or the training that would qualify them for employment that pays a living wage. Infant mortality is high in populations that lack access to good pre- and post-natal care; for affluent white families, the rate of infant mortality is a low as that in the Nordic countries, which have the lowest rate of infant mortality in the world.

(6) The epigraph to the first chapter of Mother Power is a quotation from Introduction to Psychology by Clifford T. Morgan: “Even in an animal as lowly as the rat, such an ‘unselfish’ drive as the maternal drive (to protect her pups) can be stronger than the so-called ‘self-preservation’ drives of hunger and thirst”. I found this an incongruous example of the power of maternal instinct, given that the tendency of mother rats to eat their young in conditions of overcrowding is well documented. (Mother Power: Discover the Difference That Mothers Have Made All Over The World, Jacqueline Hornor Plumez, PhD, 2002).
Notes, continued

(7) In chapter seven of Mother Power, Plumez recounts the story of Yolanda Manuel, mother of Sherrice Iverson, a seven-year-old girl who was raped and murdered in the bathroom of a Nevada casino. During the course of the crime, a friend of the perpetrator was aware the assault was taking place but did not notify security. Manuel's outrage that the second youth could not be held legally responsible for his inaction led to a campaign to pass a bill that would allow prosecution of any bystander who witnessed the sexual assault of a child without informing the police. By Plumez's account, Manuel received an outpouring of support, and the bill was signed into law in the state of California. Plumez notes that “similar laws would probably have been passed around the country and on the federal level” if Yolanda Manuel had not sacrificed “the moral high ground” by filing a wrongful death suit against the casino. It seems a mother is only qualified to be a “spiritual leader” of the crusade to protect children if she is willing to forgo her legal right to seek damages.

(8) An audio version of the entire panel discussion from the symposium is available on The Motherhood Project Web site: http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/html/maternal_feminism.html

(9) See Motherhood and its discontents on The Mothers Movement Online: http://www.mothersmovement.org/features/mhoodpapers/discontents/discontents1.htm

(10) For a number of married mothers with young children, the most immediate agent of their personal discontent is likely to look a lot like their husband, which does not bode particularly well for marital harmony. Although men are participating more consistently in child-rearing and household tasks than they were a few decades ago, the division of domestic labor is not yet equally shared by most couples with young children and recent studies show that women still handle the majority of the most time-sensitive demands of family life. The challenge of the mothers movement is to sensitize women to the larger cultural context that constrains men and women's work—not to justify the existing gendered division of care work, but as way to motivate women to take action for change on their own behalf.

(11) It is undisputed that motherhood was rejected, and in a few cases vilified, by some early radical feminists as both the symbol and structure of women's oppression—for an overview of early Second Wave attitudes about mothering and motherhood, see Lauri Umansky's Motherhood Reconceived: feminism and the legacy of the sixties (1996). More recently, feminist theory has greatly informed interdisciplinary studies of the consequences of care work on women's equality and the philosophy of social justice and a political ethic of care. The titles are far too numerous to list here, but a few are particularly relevant to the work of the mothers' movement: Child Care and Inequality: rethinking carework for children and youth, Francesca M. Cancian, Demie Kurz, Andrew S. London, Rebecca Reviere and Mary C. Tuominen, editors (2002); Care Work: Gender, Labor and the Welfare State, Madonna Harrington Meyer, editor (2000); Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency by Eva Feder Kittay (1999); and Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care by Joan C. Tronto (1994).

(12) A recent statement on the MOTHERS Web site (http://www.mothersoughttohaveequalrights.org) read “we believe that correcting the economic disadvantages facing caregivers is the big unfinished business of the women's movement.” A more elaborate detraction of the Second Wave's perceived failure to acknowledge the motherhood factor comes from Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who wrote a couple of poorly-received books on the topic (A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women’s Liberation in America, 1986, and Creating A Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children, 2002). To put this in a fair perspective, feminist mothers writing about feminism describe their sense of alienation from a movement galvanized by the activism of young women who political and professional achievements were unfettered by obligations to children and family, including Jane Lazarre (The Mother Knot, 1976) and Anne Roiphe (in her 1996 memoir, Fruitful: A Real Mother in the Modern World).
Notes, continued

(13) Feminist theorist Nancy Fraser writes that “Feminists have so far associated gender equity with either equality or difference, where “equality” means treating women exactly like men and “difference” means treating women differently insofar as the differ from men. Theorists have debated the relative merits of these two approaches as if they represented two antithetical poles of an absolute dichotomy.” According to Fraser’s analysis, “difference” proponents argue that the equality model of feminism requires women to conform to social and cultural structures that are based on a masculine norm, which disadvantages women as imposes “distorted standards on everyone”, while “egalitarians” hold that the difference approach runs the risk of institutionalizing stereotypes about feminine behavior and qualities and would ultimately confine women within existing gender divisions. Fraser remarks that both positions are based on legitimate logic, but concludes that “Neither equality or difference …is a workable conception of gender equality”. Gender Equity and the Welfare State: A Postindustrial Thought Experiment in Democracy and Difference, Seyla Benhabib, ed, 1996, Princeton University Press. Grateful acknowledgement to Carla Eastis for bringing this article to my attention.