

Motherhood and its discontents

Why mothers need a social movement of their own

Mothers today are a fortunate lot. After all, women now have choices that previous generations could only dream of. Educational and professional opportunities for women have increased dramatically over the last fifty years. Recent advances in contraceptive technology offer unprecedented power to limit and plan childbirth without inhibiting sexual spontaneity. Mothers are finally free and entitled to sample all that love and work have to offer - the warmth, fulfillment and sweetness of family life along with the personal satisfaction and economic security of a steady job or a good career. Life for the average 21st century mom should be a piece of cake - or perhaps a thick, juicy slice of apple pie.

Or so we're told.

Mothers immersed in the real world offer a very different perspective of motherhood, and it doesn't bear much resemblance to a golden scene of unmitigated gain and personal empowerment. They are much more likely to describe an experience of cumulative loss: Loss of employment opportunities, loss of long-term economic security, loss of adequate time to rest, sleep, and develop personal interests, and loss of social regard — especially for mothers who leave the workforce to focus on caring for their children and families.

Contemporary mothers have figured out that the national impetus to “put children first” usually translates into putting the needs of mothers last, and they are developing a new awareness of the inequities that affect their daily lives. Some of the most prevalent concerns for mothers are workplace standards that create insurmountable obstacles to “balancing” paid work and care work, husbands and fathers who don't pick up their fair share of the countless details and endless tasks of family life, and the dismal failure of public policy to address the basic needs of Americans with caregiving responsibilities. Mothers are beginning to realize that something in our society is badly out of whack, and it all boils down to the fact that - despite the tantalizing promise of the women's rights movement - mothers are still held accountable for the heaviest burden of family care. (1)

The Motherhood problem

Underlying the motherhood problem are deeply entrenched social, economic and cultural factors that exert a powerful claim on women's lives and livelihood. As long as a woman remains childless, she is free to play at equality (given that the status quo of male dominance continues to hold sway in the workplace and elsewhere, true equality remains elusive). But once a woman becomes a mother, the landscape changes. Now there is a child, and the child must be cared for; his or her physical, emotional and developmental needs must be met. In our society, it is the mother, above all others, who is obligated to meet these needs.

A refreshing vision of womanhood that champions the rights and responsibilities of mothers as fully-fledged individuals is shadowed by traditional ideology that valorizes the personal sacrifice of mothers and confines their instrumentality to child-bearing and child-rearing. Even with one eye turned toward women's rights, the prevailing cultural assumption is that children belong with their mothers, and mothers with their children. Although dual-earner families are now overwhelmingly the norm, the majority of Americans remain convinced that young children are better off when they are cared for by a parent at home. (2) And though the trend is ever so slowly shifting, most people — including mothers themselves - still believe that women possess a more refined capacity for the care and nurture of children. (3)

By identifying child-rearing as a maternal priority rather than a social and economic activity, the real, hard, time consuming work that goes into the care and protection of children becomes an invisible

function of family life. The unpaid and underpaid labor of caring for our children is a strategic part of our national structure. But unlike other types of work that sustain our society, the productive value of caregiving has been obliterated by isolating care work as women's work and casting it as a voluntary action that flows from the mother's emotional attachment to her children.

Care Work and Equality

The artificial segregation of care work from the mainstream of productive labor has widespread repercussions. Since care work, whether paid or unpaid, remains largely the responsibility of women, men tend to be far less encumbered by the more time-intensive demands of family life. In a society that stresses individual achievement and autonomy, men and women with limited caregiving obligations have greater opportunity to advance their personal stature through paid employment or political power. Women who devote substantial time to caring for children or other dependents are typically swept to the side of the central track, and they are more likely to suffer economic and other hardships as a result. The marginalization of mothers may not be the consequence of a conspicuous disregard for motherhood (which is has been lauded by conservatives and liberals alike as "the most important job in the world"), but it clearly reflects a major obstruction in the path to women's equality.

The dismissal of care work as merely a maternal preoccupation has other implications for the potential of human progress. Obscuring the importance and function of care as a normal and necessary component of daily life perpetuates a cultural outlook that underestimates the complexity of the human condition.

Americans are deeply enamored of the notion of independence and self-sufficiency. Our national ethos celebrates uncompromising individualism as key to both personal and social integrity. As a culture, we've embraced a concept of personal responsibility that represents economic and emotional autonomy as the pinnacle of human development. We raise our children to be honest, respectful and productive, but our principal obsession is to raise our children to become independent. (4)

There is just one catch: even the most strident self-made man or woman requires a prolonged duration of constant, attentive care at the beginning - and usually at the end - of life. Individualistic independence for all is a lofty goal, but it may not be a rational one. Human life is simply not that one-dimensional, nor would we necessarily desire it to be. In every living person of any age, the potential for independence is intrinsically linked to dependency and interdependency. The balance of independence/interdependence/dependency changes significantly over the course of a lifetime, but the three are inseparable. Rather than recognizing the duality of capacity and need as an ordinary aspect of well-developed adulthood, it has become both culturally and politically popular to reject dependency and interdependency as substandard, pathological and morally suspect.

As the primary caregivers in society, mothers bear the brunt of this half-formed ideology. To care for a dependent child, or any dependent person, involves a transmission of some of the other's dependency - unremunerated time spent caring for young or frail family members is time that cannot be used in any other way, such as earning a living, creating a masterwork, or attending to one's own personal ambitions. Since we tend to view dependency as a lesser state, people who care for dependents as part of their daily work are frequently seen as less than fully functional, regardless of their level of competence. (5)

In our culture we also maintain the belief that good care is characterized by a mutual relationship between the care-giver and the cared-for, and that care work involves some degree of emotional attachment as well as practical skill. To transfer full responsibility for the routine care of dependent children to one segment of society is neither fair nor sensible. Nor is it especially beneficial to children. (6)

Unfortunately, we've been managing gender and family in this fashion for well over two hundred years. Resistance to change is strong and steadfast; it is both politically and economically expedient to drop the responsibility for unpaid care work squarely into the mother's lap. Mothers today are caught between their need for a larger and more equitable life and social pressures to provide an ideal environment for their children's development (which, considering the current standards for appropriate child-rearing, is both expensive and time consuming).

Although some policy issues rise to the top of discussions about mothers' issues – including paid parental leave, access to affordable high-quality child care, improved legal standards for equity in divorce, social insurance for caregivers who are not in the workforce, and flexible employment practices that don't exclude caregivers from good jobs with good pay - there is as yet no collective agreement about how to rectify the larger social problems that affect mothers as a group.

A Different Sort of Motherhood

It's tempting to fall back on the scant social power offered by a long-standing cultural ideology that upholds mothers as the ultimate guardians of child welfare. A child-centered approach to advancing the political status of motherhood has been quite successful in the past, but it has not served to generate lasting improvements in the status of women or mothers. (7) The danger inherent in advocating mothers rights based on the social benefits derived from maternal nurturance is the potential to further institutionalize the inequities that confront mothers now.

Yet trying to envision a different sort of motherhood – a motherhood based on the life of the mother rather than exclusively focused on the needs of the child – leaves us riddled with anxiety. If the objective is to redistribute the responsibility for care work more fairly, mothers may become overwhelmingly concerned that they will be expected to relinquish their special claim to emotional primacy in their children's lives. This is an unlikely conclusion, but since the intimacy of the mother-child bond is often the most rewarding aspect of motherhood – and is, for many women, the primary motivation for becoming a mother - the thought alone is paralyzing.

A motherhood based on the life of the mother need not be imagined as a cold, uncaring or unfulfilled existence, nor should we automatically assume that children would be abandoned or neglected if we cultivate a different understanding of who mothers are and what they do. It doesn't mean that marriage and families will go out of style.

What *will* change is that more people will be obligated to spend time caring for others as part of their daily lives. Women, and men, will be compelled to actively engage in the continuing transformation of male and female social roles. We will have to adopt broader attitudes about the appropriate scope of social spending to promote the general welfare; moreover, we will have to redefine the concept of the general welfare to include the necessity of care.

So what would this different way of life look like? Here are my suggestions:

- Individual mothers will benefit from full equality in all social, civic and private interactions.
- Mothers and fathers will be equally represented in positions at all levels of quality employment, including elite professions and high corporate management.
- Mothers and fathers will feel equally entitled to experience, and be considered equally accountable for, all aspects of domestic life, care work and the outcome of child-rearing.
- Mothers will no longer be disproportionately vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

- Mothers will fill elective offices at all levels of government in the same proportion as fathers.
- No woman will feel morally, socially or economically obligated to sacrifice personal interests or activities that are central to her health and well-being in order to earn well or mother well.
- Sentimental representations of motherhood that prioritize obligations to children and family will be replaced by more expansive notions about the nature of motherhood, fatherhood, childhood and family life.
- Care work will be recognized as an integral part of social and economic life, and a demonstrated capacity to give care to others will be considered an asset to corporate and political leadership.
- The value of care will be reflected in public as well as private life. It will inform our government, our workplaces and our communities as well as our families.

It may take several generations of concerted effort to secure such monumental progress. Like all great undertakings, it's bound to be a process of fits and starts. But one thing is certain: the situation is unlikely to improve unless mothers take a stand on their own behalf and demand what is right, and what is fair.

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Notes:

1. The disadvantages of motherhood are well documented by current social research. For a selection of relevant facts and statistics, check out the statistics page on the Mothers & More Web site: http://www.mothersandmore.org/press_room/statistics.shtml
2. Results of 2000 surveys from Public Agenda show that 70% of parents believe that the best arrangement for child care during a child's early years is to have one parent at home full time, and more than 2 out of every 5 Americans believe the trend of more women are working and having a career at the same time they are raising children is a negative development.
3. Current census data shows that the number of dads who stay at home full time to care for their families is growing; there are an estimated 2 million fathers in the U.S. who have left the workforce to assume the role of primary caregiver (in comparison to approximately 7 million moms). However, I recently had the misfortune to view a movie trailer for a comedy titled "Daddy Day Care". The film, which stars Eddie Murphy, relates the antics of two unemployed fathers who decide to go into the day care business. Their apparent ineptitude results in a fracas that could best be described as The-Three-Stooges-meet-Barney. Message: men don't have a clue when it comes to caring for kids.
4. A 2002 survey by State Farm Insurance and Public Agenda reports the 74% of parents responded that teaching children to be independent is "absolutely essential" while only 62% believe that teaching children to "help those who are less fortunate" is "absolutely essential". (The same survey reported that only 33% of parents surveyed feel

it is absolutely essential to teach their children to “enjoy art and literature” - no comment.) The Child Trends 2002 *Charting Parenthood* report indicates that 59% of mothers and 52% of fathers believe that “thinking for oneself” is the most important thing for a child to learn; fewer than 10% of mothers and fathers in the study prioritized teaching their children to “help others in need”.

5. A recent study on cognitive bias found that homemakers are typically stereotyped as having a competence level similar to retarded people, the disabled, the elderly and the blind. (Susan T. Fiske, Amy J. Cuddy, *A Model of (Often Mixed) Stereotype Content: Competence and Warmth Respectively Follow From Perceived Status and Competition*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, June 2002). Feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay describes care work as “dependency work” to clarify the dependent nature of both the cared-for and the care-giver. (*Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*, 1999)

6. The litany of disadvantages that affect children in America – which as we all know is one of the wealthiest nations in the world - has been pretty thoroughly publicized, including high under-5 mortality rates, high poverty rates, and lower rates of access to health care in comparison to children in other wealthy nations. Visit the Children’s Defense Fund Web site (www.childrensdefense.org) for more details.

7. “Maternalist” social movements during the late 19th and early 20th century had a profound influence on policy making though the mid-1900s. By promoting social programs in support of children and families, middle-class women affiliated through large voluntary organizations were extremely successful in securing social reforms. But rather than protecting the general needs of women for better working conditions and economic security, maternalist sentiment focused on the value of a woman’s well-being in its relation to motherhood. A modern example of maternalist strategy was evident in the Million Mom March of May 2000. Concerned mothers organized a mass demonstration Washington, DC – not to decry gun violence against women and mothers, but to call attention to the problem of gun violence against children.

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