

## A Mother's Place Is in the Women's Movement

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*In observance of Women's History month, Elizabeth Bauchner looks at how early feminism spearheaded social reforms, but left women in the home. The second wave focused on the work force. Now, she says, it's high time to fight for mothers' rights.*

**Editor's Note:** *The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--The 1970s women's liberation movement, or Second Wave of Feminism, necessarily focused on getting women out of the house and into the paid work force.

That movement largely ignored the needs of mothers regardless if they worked outside the home or did not. The unintended result of that is that mothers now find it harder than ever to provide meaningful care for their young children. That should be corrected now, while the political sun shines during campaign season. The women's movement should rally itself and fight for mothers' rights and put child care into the spotlight. Mothers should let our policy makers know what we want and need.

In the late 19th century, several women's organizations--many made up of middle-class wives and mothers--spearheaded social policy changes that still benefit Americans today. Tick them off: suffrage, free public libraries, kindergartens, playgrounds and reforms of laws governing child labor, juvenile justice and prisons. Women's push to provide pensions for destitute mothers led to the federal Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

In those days, mothers were at the forefront of feminism. However, according to Judy Tucker, editor and founder of the The Mothers Movement Online, the campaigns may have helped mothers, but they were also designed to keep women home.

Flash forward to the Second Wave. On the heels of June Cleaver and valium-popping housewives came sexual-revolution feminists. The second wave brought us the "Feminine Mystique," further work on the Equal Rights Amendment and unprecedented reproductive freedoms. The second wave created NOW, arguably the most influential and

important feminist organization fighting for women today. It also began the push to end gender-linked barriers to work for women outside the home.

But with all that was gained for women, I believe mothers were left behind.

### **Mothers Face the Most Discrimination**

Today, mothers overwhelmingly continue to be the primary caregivers of children. Recent U.S. Census data indicates that nearly one-third of all children under age 15 lived with a stay-at-home mother in 2002, while only 3.6 percent lived with a stay-at-home dad. Furthermore, Census data only tracked parents who were out of the paid work force for the entire 52 weeks of the year, so mothers who got paid for as little as one week's work in 2002 were considered working mothers. In addition, regardless if mothers work outside of the home, they remain by and large the primary caregivers of their children.

We like to think that all women have choices today. But what kinds of choices do mothers really have? The choice to work our rear ends off in corporate jobs that refuse viable part-time positions or quit and stay home? The choice to go on welfare after a divorce and then be forced to work at Wal-Mart? The choice to never see our kids during daytime hours or never put our college degrees to work?

"I think it just goes back to old-fashioned discrimination against women," says Ann Crittenden, author of the "The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued." "We lavishly support the things men choose to do, whether they choose careers in the military, or science, or farming, but we don't support the choices women make," Crittenden adds. Namely, the choice for women to bear and raise a child themselves.

### **Mothers Need Economic Security**

Crittenden and others believe the unpaid work of mothers needs to be quantified and measured by the Gross Domestic Product and also qualify for Social Security. Women who stay home to raise their children--the future taxpayers of America--unintentionally put themselves at financial risk. In fact, spending time out of the paid work force to raise children (or provide any type of unpaid caregiving work) can lead to poverty. This is amply demonstrated by the current cohort of retirement-age women, who are almost twice as likely to be poor than men in the same age group.

"We feel that the unpaid caregiving work that all mothers do has got to be recognized and valued by society," says Joanne Brundage, founder and executive director of Mothers and More, an Illinois-based advocacy group for mothers.

To help keep mothers and children out of poverty we also need viable part-time work options, health care, access to education and job training regardless of our economic status, and affordable, high-quality preschool and day care if we choose it for our children.

## **Mothers and Others Can Work for Changes**

In the past two decades, feminist groups that focus on mothers' rights have sprung up around the country. Mothers and More, based in Elmhurst, Ill., and started in 1987, seeks to "care for the caregiver" through support, information and advocacy.

Part of that support takes the form of mother-to-mother personal support through the local chapters. According to Brundage, while that effort is crucial, it's time for more advocacy.

"We have always felt that it's wonderful to offer each other one-on-one support. But without that second step, all we're doing is helping each other through a bad situation that never changes."

Brundage and Crittenden agree that advocating on behalf of mothers means raising awareness about the issues they face. To that end, Crittenden helped create the group MOTHERS (Mothers Ought To Have Equal Rights), a national organization under the sponsorship of the National Association of Mothers' Centers, based in Levittown, N.Y.

They're currently working on a project called the "Economic ABCs for Mothers," which will be a one-night workshop that people can hold in their own communities about issues such as the risks to economic security that come with motherhood.

Policy changes that help mothers will benefit fathers, too. Many fathers are now forgoing paid work to stay home and raise their kids. And perhaps even more fathers (and mothers) would enjoy staying home longer and providing more meaningful care for their children if it was truly valued by society and economically feasible to do so. That would benefit everyone.

*Elizabeth Bauchner lives in Ithaca, N. Y., with her husband and three children. She writes a weekly column, "Mothering Matters," for the Ithaca Journal.*

**For more information regarding NOW-NJ Mothers' Economic Rights Task Force, Chapter MER TF development, or to receive additional action kits, please contact Laurie Pettine at [mertf\\_info@nownj.org](mailto:mertf_info@nownj.org) or 973-214-2643.**