

# Reaching out to moms

## A NOW chapter in Morris County addresses mothering issues

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**Star-Ledger Staff**

AT FIRST GLANCE, the women and their children at the community center in Morris Plains seemed to be a play group or mothers' club. But in between nursing babies and soothing toddlers, the conversation was about paid parental leave, affordable childcare, and Social Security credits for at-home moms.

A meeting of Morris County Mothering NOW was under way. Yes, that's right, NOW, as in the National Organization for Women, the nation's leading feminist group.

"We want to bring mothers' issues to the front burner. We're going to have discussions that might not seem appropriate at a play group," said Laurie Pettine, 36, an at-home mother of two from Mendham and a founder of the task force. The task force, affiliated with the Morris County NOW chapter, and another affiliated with the South Jersey-Alice Paul chapter in Moorestown are believed to be the only such groups in the country.

The new task forces plan to register voters for the upcoming presidential election, and lobby for legislation like an Assembly bill that would provide paid family leave. They are concerned about health care issues like the high Caesarean birth rate in New Jersey.

"These issues are very important, and the task forces are a great way for people to become aware of NOW's work," said Elizabeth Voltz, the president of NJ-NOW and a mother of four.

To many, however, NOW and mothers don't seem to have the same agenda. Click on the icon for families on its Web site, and the top concern is same-sex marriage. Since the 1970s, during the "second wave" of feminism, there's been debate about whether the movement values the work of caregivers as much as women in the paid labor force. NOW founder Betty Freidan argued in "The Second Statge" in 1981 that the feminist movement had to be more family-friendly.

Members of NOW and its supporters are quick to point out that the organization has worked on issues like child care and family leave since its inception in 1966.

"That these very issues have become mainstream is a success of the women's movement," said Lauri Umansky, a professor of women's history at Suffolk University in Boston, and author of "Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties," in which she defended NOW's record on family issues.

Critics took that as evidence that while NOW was an advocate for workplace issues, the actual job of being a mother was not accorded respect, a theme explored in Ann Crittendon's 2001 bestseller, "The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued."

But the intersection of motherhood and feminism is now becoming more common. A mothers' movement encompassing feminist tenets is gaining momentum.

"Feminism and Mothering" is the topic of the Association for Research on Mothering's conference at York University in Toronto later this month. The National Women's Studies Association has a task force on "feminist mothers and their allies." The Greater Boston NOW held a discussion on feminism and motherhood at a recent meeting.

At the same time, a coalition of mothers' organizations, including Mothers and More, the National Associations of Mothers' Centers, and Crittendon's group, MOTHERS (for Mothers Ought to Have Equal Rights), is raising awareness of issues such as giving Social Security credits to mothers for the years they are at home raising children.

"Feminism and motherhood have had oppositional identities: If you're a mother you can't be a feminist, and if you're a feminist you can't be a mother. If you're a working mother, you're progressive; if you're an at-home mother, you're conservative. It's not true. Anything that challenges that perception is good," said Andrea O'Reilly, president of the research association, which she said is the only such group in the world.

O'Reilly acknowledged the tension between NOW and the Motherhood Project, which is supported by a conservative think tank, in the past over the best way to support mothers. She straddles both camps.

A professor of women's studies at York University, she is on the board of the Motherhood Project and will be speaking at the National Association of Mothers' Centers in Parsippany in November. The conference will feature leaders of the mother's movement, including Crittendon and Peggy O'Mara, publisher and editor of Mothering magazine. Mothering NOW task force members will also attend.

"I'm very excited about their involvement. We are working to mobilize mothers around issues important to them. Having NOW fits so perfectly with the work of raising consciousness," said Linda Lisi Juergens, director of the mothers' centers association.

"We look at this as the unfinished business of the feminist movement," said Joan Brundage, executive director of Mothers and More. The South Orange-Maplewood chapter is the largest in the organization, she added.

The women in the new task forces are in their 20s through 40s, and they see their role as not only to push for social change, but to draw in younger members.

"We see this as a wonderful way of getting younger women involved," said Mavra Stark, president of the 300-member Morris County NOW chapter. "If you don't get new members, you'll die as a chapter."

Besides the task force meetings in the middle of the day, which attract at-home mothers, the chapter is providing child care at its monthly evening meeting in an attempt to be more parent-friendly. The women hope to help set up mothering tasks forces in all the chapters in the state, and eventually, the country, said Stacey Gregg of Rockaway, 42, a mother of two who is a doula, someone who helps a new mother during and after pregnancy and birth.

The first step will be to introduce a resolution supporting task forces at the state NOW convention this fall and the national conference next summer. A spokeswoman for the national office of NOW said top officers were not aware of the task forces, and that they are under the jurisdiction of the state chapter.

"This is something I really wanted to see in our chapter. We had four to five people around my age who had babies in the past year. They haven't come back to meetings since they had kids. They've just kind of disappeared," said Jennifer Armiger, a past president of the Alice Paul chapter who has an 8-month-old son.

"I started thinking about how I have these different pulls in my life. I love NOW and I'm a feminist, but the issues of specific concern to moms are not necessarily at the top of the NOW agenda," said Armiger, 29, a graduate student working on her history dissertation.

She believes NOW can be a critical player because of its history of political activism.

O'Reilly said many women become feminists after they have children, when they are faced with balancing work and child care, or the condescension many at-home mothers report.

Beth Sparacino, 36, an at-home mother of two girls, said motherhood "radicalized" her. The former history teacher turned activist said she didn't consider herself a feminist until the birth of her first child, when she started thinking about issues such as equal pay for part-time work.

"I want to bring that to the forefront now," she said.

**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.**