

Empowered mothers change the world [CA-NB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Motherhood should not impoverish you. Mothers are people too. Children are the responsibility of both parents. Every child a wanted child. Motherwork is work.

Much of the women's movement has been about those issues, about motherwork.

Mothers remain the main movers behind the movement. A fight for mothers to be valued, for a world where parenting was shared between the sexes and supported by the community.

Giving women more options -- at the core of the movement -- has meant changing attitudes and sometimes laws so that women could have children as well as a job, or not have children, or not be penalized for choosing to take care of children.

Loosening the divisions of the world was another founding piece of the women's movement. Within families, the traditional divisions of work based on sex were targeted.

In society, it was the strict split between the public world of production and the private world of reproduction -- divisions that made women's struggle for maternity and parental leaves so hard-fought and lengthy, and that is making the idea of quality child care such a minefield.

...

Women have tried to improve the conditions under which parenting could be done in this society. Women realized that societal neglect of the needs of children, families and women was not a coincidence. And so the work began for changes -- family allowances, marital property laws, reproductive and birthing health options, and more.

Much of that work is unfinished and some of it gets undone -- like housework.

Child care is still much under-valued, as a task and as a paid job.

Many mothers-to-be do not qualify for maternity/parental leave under the poor program Canada has; mothers who do qualify sometimes cannot afford to take the one-year leave on the low salary replacement of the program.

Family friendly employers are as hard to find as family friendly governments.

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A brilliant article in Maclean's said recently, "although child rearing is a job, which, if done properly, benefits the family and the nation, the bulk of the responsibility for undertaking it sits on a mother's shoulders." It also reported that internationally, the policies that have been the most successful in encouraging families to have more babies have been those that facilitate the careers of mothers: "Who would have thought that the most economically sound solution to a fertility crisis would be rooted in good old-fashioned feminism?"

Today's new mothers were raised to believe that equality is a right. York University's Association for Research on Mothering seems to be populated by such mothers. They publish an academic journal with titles like "Mothering, Law, Politics and Public Policy", "Mothering and Work/Mothering as Work" and "Mothers and Sons". It has also spawned a "Mother Outlaw" group, complete with black T-shirts, of mothers who meet over potluck to discuss motherhood issues from a feminist perspective and the links between their mothering practices and social change.

Last week, the Mother Outlaw group in Toronto presented a play by the founder of another interesting group, Mothers Acting Up. The one-woman show is a woman's experience in a fictional United Nations program, "Baby Swapping," where certain mothers are required to swap their baby for one month with a mother from another nation. She realizes her connection with these other mothers, children and nations and her concern is transformed into action on behalf of the world's children.

Empowering mothers to be effective advocates for the world's children is an action very likely to improve conditions for children . . . and

women. And it is a return to the original intention of the North American version of Mothers' Day.

Bostonian Julia Ward Howe' Mothers Day Proclamation, published in 1870, was more about changing the world order than about you giving flowers to your mother: "Arise then . . . women of this day! . . . Say firmly: Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

Mothers Acting Up urges mothers to "find your inner grizzly" -- whatever makes you mad enough to roar and to take action.

Maybe that half of children in the world live in poverty, that women's influence is mostly absent from elected bodies, that about half of war victims are children or that most child care is uninspected or . . .

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