

Maternal activism

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Abstract

This entry provides a brief overview of maternal activism. Succinctly stated, maternal activism refers to the process whereby a woman, or a group, adopts the figure of the mother to make claims on behalf of her sons or daughters. The central aim of maternal activism is to pursue a politics of visibility – a series of actions as well as performances to raise awareness about a particular concern in order to demand peace and or social justice. This politics of visibility is the driving force behind maternal activism and it is deployed through diverse practices, including direct action, public protests, teaching rallies, and press conferences. In this sense, it is widely recognized that activists' adoption of motherhood is performative, which indicates that maternal activism depicts not a biological experience but rather a public and collective one to bring about social justice.

The term maternal activism has been used to denote women's deployment of the mother identity in their campaigns for economic, social, and political change. Although it is oftentimes assumed that mothers' participation in politics and the public sphere is an exception, historically women have found that mothering is not only a private endeavor, but also a political one. For example, in Greek antiquity, as Jacqueline Rose notes, becoming a mother signaled a woman's incorporation into civic life (Rose 2014). Maternity provided women with a new economic and affective power, allowing them to stop being an object of exchange. In other words, through maternity women gained public recognition. They became more, rather than less, engaged in the *polity* thanks to the moral authority and prestige that is commonly attributed to motherhood, particularly in those societies that value mothers above all other women (Taylor 1997).

It should be noted, however, that maternal activism arises not, as it is commonly assumed, from the actual experience of giving birth, but rather from systematic experiences of social and political neglect, economic deprivation, physical injury, and even death. Accordingly,

maternal activism denotes the process whereby a woman, or a group, adopts the figure of the mother to make claims on behalf of her sons, daughters, and community. As such, the central aim of maternal activism is to pursue a politics of visibility – a series of actions as well as performances seeking to raise awareness about a particular concern in order to reestablish peace and or justice. The politics of visibility is the driving force behind maternal activism and it is deployed through diverse practices such as direct action, public protests, teaching rallies, press conferences, community work, and others.

Historically, maternal activism has been preoccupied with a wide range of issues, including free access to education, social welfare, the environment, affordable healthcare, housing, recreation spaces for the youth, prevention of drug consumption and alcoholism, and, increasingly, violence (see, for example, Naples 1998a,b). The emphasis on this issue indicates that mothering practices and community work are not always mutually exclusive, even if they are historically, geographically, and culturally specific. In fact, as Nancy Naples notes, women who engage in community work see this kind of involvement as a way to improve the lives of their own family members and their neighbors. Furthermore, by drawing on the experiences of African American and Latina community activists in New York City and Philadelphia, Naples rightly destabilized the boundaries between home and community, paid and unpaid work, and private and political goals (Naples 1992, 1998a,b).

Maternal activism is a transformative human activity and practice that takes many forms. An example is community work in (mostly, albeit not exclusively, poor) neighborhoods and communities. In this case, maternal activism is an ethic of care as Joan Tronto envisions it: “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 1998, 16). An ethic of care demands not only thoughtful judgments about care and caring, but also active involvement. Therefore, an ethic of care is more than attitude toward others. It is both an action and a practice that “occur[s] in a variety of institutions and settings. Care is found in the household, in services and goods sold in the market, in the workings of bureaucratic organizations, in contemporary life” (Tronto 1998, 16).

As an ethic of care, maternal activism finds inspiration in the experiences of grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and many women who fought for equality, fairness, and justice.

To be sure, in the early 1990s, Naples found that women's negative experiences with racism, classism, and sexism sparked their interest in community work, which they approached as a way to address basic problems such as childcare, voter registration, and elder care (Naples 1998, 109). Such experiences of discrimination and injustice led them to do "what needed to be done" to demand better living conditions for African American and Latino communities. This indicates that mothers, even those women with no children of their own, stand at the forefront of contemporary struggles for social justice not only because they seek a personal benefit, but also because their desire to improve the living conditions of the whole community (Naples 1992). Thus, with its role in making visible everyday social injustices, maternal activism is significant in transforming persisting race, class, and gender structures.

Another example of maternal activism is found in regions with frequent political unrest such as Latin America and the Middle East, where mothers have been at the forefront of struggles for social justice (see, for example, Wright 2006, Staudt 2008, Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). In these cases, women have found that motherhood provides them with a moral voice to denounce injustice and promote political change. Maternal activism has been central in states undergoing extraordinary rates of violence. In such cases, it has been widely demonstrated that women take a central role in the process of denouncing torture, systematic murder, or enforced disappearance – the kidnapping of young women and men by state forces or criminal organizations. As historian Thomas Laqueur has argued, the mother is the paradigmatic figure of mourning (Laqueur 2002). Thus, when a mass campaign of murder, massacre, or genocide takes place, mothers gain prominence because they take on the task of mourning and commemorating the dead. In the sexual division of labor, mourning is a task overwhelmingly given to women. As a result, maternal organizations are oftentimes portrayed as the legitimate guardians of memory. The public display of maternal pain reminds us that the victims of catastrophic violence had a name and a story and that belonged to a family and a community. In this sense, maternal activism functions as the archetype of a universal ethic of care and love in search of rightful retribution. Some of the most representative examples of maternal activism around the world are The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the mothers of femicide and disappeared women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico, and the Mothers for Peace in Palestine.

One of the first groups to organize in order to denounce state violence in Latin America was the Argentinean organization best known as Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (the Mothers

of the Plaza de Mayo). Since 1985, Las Madres began a persistent campaign to demand the return of the disappeared women and men and to name the skeletal remains of those who were murdered during the military dictatorship, or the Dirty War (1976–1983). The mothers began denouncing human rights violations (kidnappings, illegal detentions, torture, and mass murder) as a single group in 1977. However, conflicts having to do with issues of leadership, representation, financial resources, commemoration, and even the meaning of motherhood resulted in the organization's split in 1986. As a result, two separate groups were created: (1) La Línea Fundadora (The Founding Line of the Mothers) and (2) and the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo (The Association of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo). The split in the organization can be characterized as the public–private divide oftentimes associated with maternal activism.

Whereas La Línea Fundadora regarded motherhood as personal and individual, the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo began redefining motherhood as public and collective. In doing so, they sought to represent all those women and men who were affected by the violent events that took place during the military dictatorship. Such a conception of motherhood enabled the construction of a broader struggle for social change that sought to move away from individual demands for justice. However, despite the differences between the two separate groups of Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, their weekly marches at 3:30 p.m. in the Plaza de Mayo have inspired similar groups in Chile, Brazil, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, and many other countries around the world. One such group inspired by Argentinean mothers emerged in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, during the last decade of the twentieth century. This group of activist mothers arose in response to nearly 500 murders and more than 1000 disappearances of women.

In Mexico, maternal activism became prominent after the mothers of the murdered and disappeared women launched a permanent campaign to make femicide – the murder, with state impunity, of women and girls because they are female – visible and to demand justice. Mothers and relatives of the victims formed human rights organizations such as Voces sin Eco (Voices Without Echo), Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (May Our Daughters Return Home), and Justicia para Nuestras Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters) to call people's attention to the fact that an increasing number of women were being brutally murdered. In addition, maternal activism in Ciudad Juárez offered a powerful critique against the state institutions that reproduce a culture of impunity by failing to provide adequate solutions to the problem of gender-based violence.

Maternal activism has emerged in Ciudad Juárez alongside the implementation of new forms of social and political organization, including transnational solidarity, human rights discourse and practice, and the ethic of care.

Maternal activism has also emerged around the Israel–Palestine conflict. In particular, maternal activism has played a crucial role in the national struggle for liberation. This happened since 1987, after the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem when motherhood was raised to the level of national duty. Palestinian women received worldwide attention for using motherhood to make visible the hundreds of deaths resulting from the continuing Israeli–Palestine conflict and other occupation-related violence such as targeted arrests, house demolitions, and family disintegration. Because of this, maternal activism is regarded as a central part of the liberation movement. Palestinian mothers bear witness to the persistent injustice resulting from the occupation. In addition, maternal activism in Palestine has revolved around food and goods boycotts of Israeli imports seeking to make visible the violence of the occupation.

An important aspect to note in all the aforementioned examples of maternal activism is the role of symbolic mothers, also known as community mothers, a practice that extends mothering to those women who embrace communal responsibility even in those cases when women who act as community mothers do not have children of their own. As African American intellectuals have shown, grandmothers, sisters, nieces, aunts, and friends who assist biological mothers have played a fundamental role in the struggle for liberation and political change understood in its broad sense (Collins 2000). In doing so, they have rendered motherhood collective.

While the aforementioned examples of maternal activism show that political mobilization through the figure of the mother crosses ethnic, class, and racial divides, it is also important to emphasize that, in a very real sense, a great number of mothers who became politically active after losing a son or a daughter are working-class women. This is particularly evident in Ciudad Juárez, where the overwhelming majority of murdered and disappeared women were poor. In fact, former activist Ester Chávez Cano once declared that the impunity surrounding femicide cases in Juárez is due to the fact that the victims were working-class women (Chávez Cano et al. 2010). In this respect, maternal activism is deployed to highlight the humanity of both the victim

and the mother, whose right to justice is not guaranteed given that poverty relegates them to a second-class citizen status.

Finally, although maternal activism is frequently celebrated, the adoption of maternalism to make political claims is not without problems since, as prominent feminist Mary Dietz has repeatedly claimed (Dietz 1985). In fact, there is a prominent debate within feminist theory about the political significance of maternal activism. This debate has sought to interrogate the relevance of maternal activism for a more radical project of female emancipation given that women's traditional position within the family has been the main source of their subordination. In other words, for radical feminists, it is important to maintain a critical stance with respect to maternal activism to the extent that the sexual division of labor has been the basis to confine women to the domestic sphere and to ban them from politics. In such cases, maternal activism may help to reproduce, rather than challenge, traditional gender roles (Dietz 1985). Two central figures in this debate are Jean Bethke Elshtain and political and feminist theorist Mary G. Dietz.

Using the Argentinean Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo as her model, Elshtain has defended maternal values and maternal thinking as a model for political life. With respect to the mothers, Elshtain claims that their activism indeed challenged traditional gendered roles. They did this by taking to the plaza where they created a space for anti-repressive politics (Elshtain 1982). In doing so, they helped to bring about the fall of the dictatorship in Argentina. Thus for Elshtain, the Mothers questioned the political excesses of the Military Junta and denounced the disappearances of thousands of dissidents despite the fact that their challenge came from the ethical stance of a caring maternity preoccupied with "moral protest and democracy." Critics such as Dietz claim, however, that although the Mothers' ethics of lamentation might be politically salient, the movement itself was not primarily political. In fact, from the standpoint of radical feminism, it seemed strikingly apolitical. Accordingly, Dietz challenged Elshtain's defense of maternal activism, arguing that this form of activism distorts the meaning of politics and political action by reinforcing a one-dimensional view of women as creatures of the family (Dietz, 1985).

Although there is some truth to both sides of the debate, it is important to emphasize that the important lesson we learn by looking at maternal activism is that this type of activism has indeed demonstrated that the boundaries dividing the private from the public sphere are inoperable in practice. For one, the mothers have had to rely on their private roles as mothers

revealing publicly the immense pain of having lost a son or a daughter in order to denounce state and criminal violence. Furthermore, nothing inherent in the experience of mothering dictates that a mother should always assume the responsibility of denouncing the death or disappearance of a child. In fact, the mothers' criticism of the state makes it clear that justice is the responsibility of the state and its political institutions. Regardless, mothers continue to be the ones who organize all over the world to demand justice on behalf of their children. Because of this, one is able to see that activists' adoption of motherhood is indeed performative and depicts not a biological experience but a public and collective one seeking to instill social justice as well as political change.

SEE ALSO: Activist mothering, Consciousness-raising; Ethic of care; Femicide; Gender performance; Gender politics and the state: Overview; Gender violence; Maternalism

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