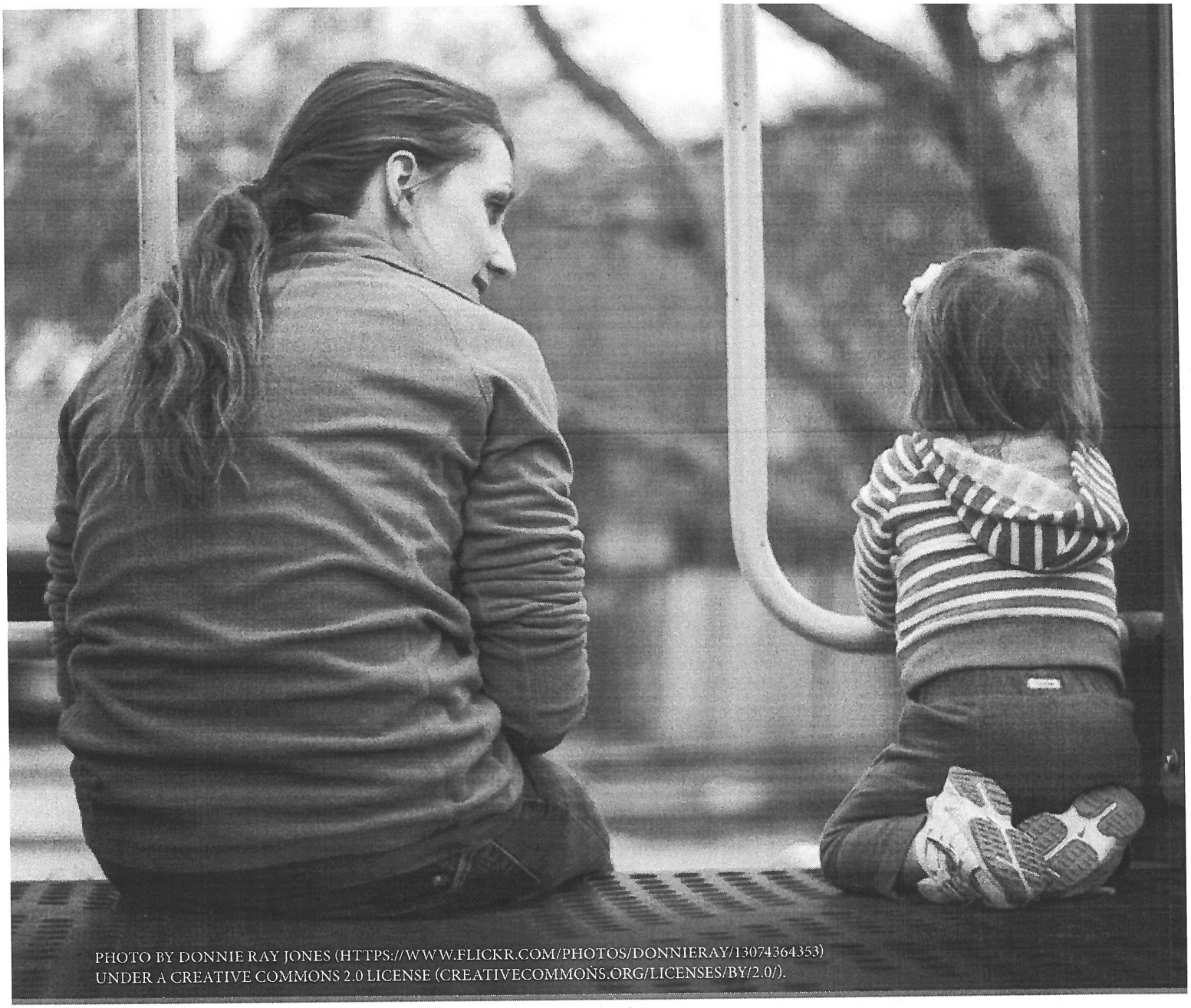

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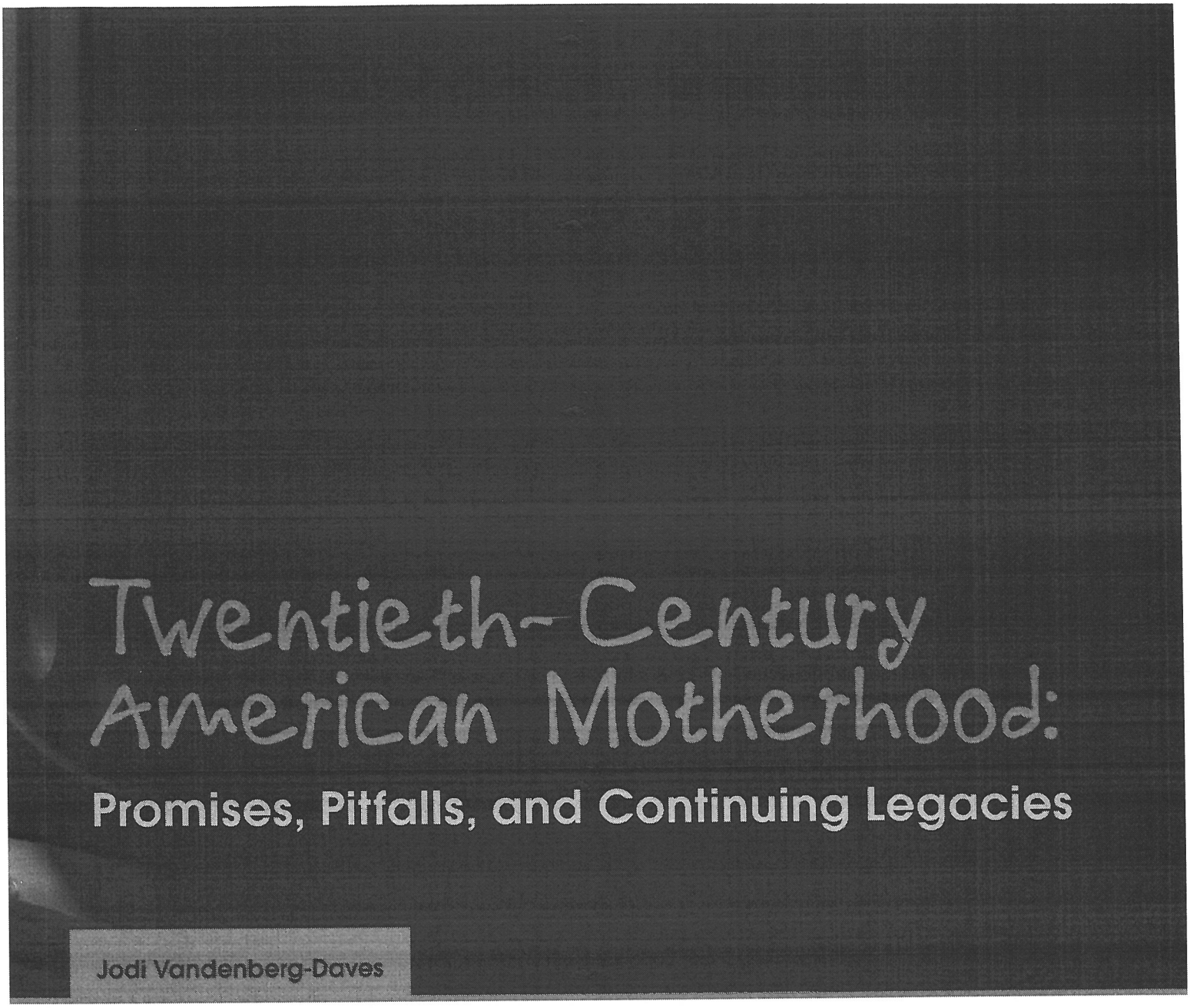
In the mid-nineteenth century, as the American northern middle-class consolidated, many commentators waxed poetic about the ideal mother: she was the selfless, pious, emotional, softer half of the parenting duo, happily economically dependent and bound to the home to build the character of youth, while her husband earned the daily bread. A child loved a mother best because "her voice is gentlest, her eye beams with fondest affection; she soothes his little sorrows, and bears with his irritability with the tenderest and untiring patience."[1] This ideal, however, was difficult to apply to the situations of southern slavery, or northern wage-earning family lives, not to mention to the emotional and economic realities of many middle-class families. Yet this imagined mother is still with us today.

At the same time, much has changed. Victorian motherhood ideals were challenged as twentieth-century motherhood emerged in the midst of the tremendous social and economic upheavals of the industrialization, mass immigration, urbanization, class and race stratification, and the promises and perils of science, professionalism, and Progressive reform. For some early-twentieth-century mothers, the world was turning upside down. Coping with the vagaries of industrial employment, mothers had to adapt to urban environments and a cash economy, onerous chores in the absence of time-saving technology, and the health hazards of urban living before modern infrastructure and medical advancements.



Twentieth-Century American Motherhood:

Promises, Pitfalls, and Continuing Legacies

Jodi Vandenberg-Daves

Working-class mothers managed family resources, including the labor force participation of their children. As one immigrant woman explained her need to bring industrial piecework into her home, "The man he no works two days, three days maybe in one week, two weeks. Sunday, no work, no money...My girl we maka de feathers. The children must have to eat."[2] Another immigrant woman reportedly gave birth to her child while returning her sister's washboard, "washed baby at sister's house, walked home, cooked supper for boarders, and was in bed by 8 o'clock. Got up and ironed next day...milked cows and sold milk day after baby's birth."[3]

For other mothers, especially those more securely situated through the privileges of class and race, the new century represented hope for happier, healthier families. Mrs. W. D., who wrote to the U.S. Children's Bureau, burned with hope that her family's tragedy of infant loss, so painfully common at the time, could become a thing of the past. Though "money and efforts were not spared to save her son," neither parents nor doctors knew enough. She continued, "my baby was sacrificed thru mere ignorance." But this need not happen, she insisted. In this era of science "wonderful work is being done" and the future looked brighter.[4]

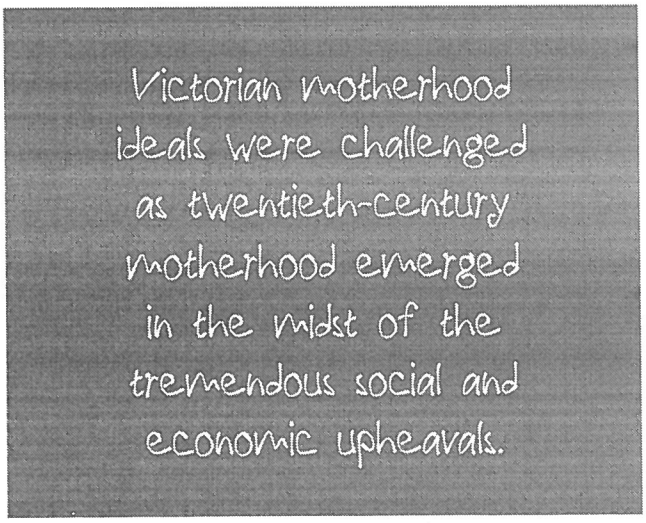
For Progressive-era reformers—both white and African-American—advocating for a safety net and health and social services for families, and for socialist radicals like Clara Lemlich Shavelson, who organized housewives in consumer activism in urban neighborhoods, honoring motherhood was the lingua franca of the day. Bemoaning

the poverty of industrial-era mothers, especially widows, the president of the Tennessee Congress of Mothers insisted, "we cannot afford to let a mother, one who has divided her body by creating lives for the good of the state, one who has contributed to citizenship, be classed as a pauper, a dependent."[5]

The promises of science and civically and economically empowered motherhood shaped mothers' lives in many ways in the modernizing period before the Second World War. Women not only achieved suffrage in this period, but also experienced declining patriarchal authority. Fathers' rights to control their children's inheritance and labor were curtailed in the nineteenth century, along with their automatic rights to custody in the case of divorce. And the state now showed a willingness to usurp paternal authority, for example, to curtail abuse, or to require children to attend school or undergo immunization.

Many mothers who were unhappily partnered with their husbands or economically abandoned by them clearly grasped the possibilities. They wrote letters to the U.S. Children's Bureau or to elected officials asking for some way to locate husbands who left them impoverished; they took estranged spouses to court for child support; they chipped away at male authority in households; and they increased their labor force participation. Women's labor force participation as a whole grew from 18 to 25 percent between 1890 and 1940.[6]

Early twentieth-century mothers also demonstrated a growing sense of entitlement to ask for resources or create their own solutions to the shortcomings of support by state and society, not just of individual men. African-American mothers founded schools across the South and created child care and health services for under-served members of "the race." Mothers asked for cash assistance from the state, especially when they lacked male support. They strategized to send their children to school, and they increasingly demanded information on birth control, buoyed by Margaret Sanger's revolutionary demands for reproductive control for modern mothers. "Now what I want to know," insisted one mother, "is Why can't We poor people be given Birth Control as well as Dr.'s & the Rich people…We need help to prevent more babies."[7] Mothers of this era understood that repeated pregnancies endangered their health and that they risked death, leaving behind the children they already had.



But opportunities to achieve the resources so many mothers said they needed to do the work of mothering were consistently circumscribed by cultural gender prescriptions, a largely unregulated capitalist economy creating hardscrabble lives for working-class people, and structural racism. In the first half of the century, demands for birth control met fierce resistance, tainted with the specter of female sexual freedom and the abandonment motherhood, or "race suicide" by white women. The cause of reproductive control also became partially co-opted by the population control agenda of eugenicists, or population control advocates, leading to coerced sterilization of tens of thousands of women between the 1900s and the 1970s. In the meantime, reforms like mothers' pensions for cash assistance met only a fraction of the need and in many states discriminated against mothers of color.

Modern science and professionalism also proved to be mixed blessings for mothers. Some of the dividends of modern medicine were indisputable: by the mid-twentieth century, maternal mortality and infant mortality had declined to historic lows thanks to immunizations, antibiotics, public health measures like milk pasteurization, and mothers' willingness to adopt a new regime of what historian Rima Apple has appropriately called "scientific motherhood."[8] By the 1950s, for the first time ever, mothers could approach childbirth with a minimal fear of dying in labor or from postpartum infections. Even as early as the 1920s, scientifically informed, increasingly literate and health-conscious mothers encountered expert advice on everything from proper bath water temperatures for babies, to psychological advice about habits such as thumb-sucking.

But in offering this advice, the almost all-male medical and psychology professions often belittled maternal knowledge. In 1918 one physician laid the blame for the 100,000 infant deaths in the U.S. at the feet of babies' "mothers or their grandmothers or their sisters, who loved them very much but did not know how babies ought to be cared for."[9] And the consumer culture contributed to mothers' fears, promising infant formula that would make their babies grow faster, "doctor-

At the turn of the twentieth century, Victorian ideals of motherhood—women happily dependent on men, bound to the home and only concerned with raising their children—often clashed with economic realities, as many working class women, along with their children, had to work to make ends meet.

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approved" germ-reducing products, and, as psychological expertise became popularized, behavioral training programs. Moreover, "expert" culture was sometimes deployed in ways that exacerbated the difficulties of working-class, immigrant, and racial minority families, as when, in the name of containing disease, public health experts removed children from families' care when families did not follow explicit, often impossible advice.

Mothers were charged with keeping babies safe and healthy while forming their characters. But then, as now, the edification of mothers was often offered as a substitute for providing mothers resources, like affordable health care, opportunities for clean running water, and healthy food to sustain mothers and families. This was partly because of the stunted welfare state that characterized the United States, even after Progressive reformers had made some improvements, and partly because of the continuity in motherhood ideals: mothers, Americans believed, had a unique moral influence. Through their constant attention, motivation, and sacrifice, mothers could fortify and take responsibility for each generation of the nation's children, with very little structural support, but with a little help from the experts.

At its best, the culture of expertise directed at child-rearing offered mothers a broader range of ideas and solutions than they had once had. Scientific motherhood ideas popularized important improvements in childcare practices, such as immunizations, and, through organizations like the Children's Bureau, helped empower mothers with a sense that they could and should take care of their own health while also seeking resources for rearing their children. By the mid-twentieth-century, the most famous childcare advisor, Dr. Benjamin Spock, sought to reassure mothers rather than blame them (though it is worth noting that, like every other major twentieth-century child care adviser, Spock was not a mother and had never been a primary care provider for his or any other children). Also, as child care advice proliferated it became more populist and peer-to-peer oriented, incorporating but sometimes transcending or challenging expertise. And expertise expanded as medical and psychological professions opened to women and other under-represented groups.

But at its worst, especially before experts were widely challenged in the 1960s, scientific motherhood and its counterpart, psychologized motherhood, devalued motherhood in general and vulnerable mothers in particular. Two prominent mid-twentieth examples stand out: Phillip Wylie (no expert himself, but bolstered by experts), popularized the idea of "Momism" in the late 1940s, even prompting the Oxford English Dictionary editors to include a definition: "an excessive attachment to, or domination by the mothers." No mother was immune from this charge, as commentators like Wylie lambasted mothers for too much attention, while others condemned them for too little. And in the 1950s and 1960s mothers of autistic children faced some of the harshest condemnations of modern scientific experts, as Drs. Leo Kanner and Bruno Bettelheim popularized the notion of the "refrigerator mother," the mother whose absence of love for her child caused the child's autism.[10]

The movements of the 1960s and subsequent decades would disrupt some important dimensions of the stultifying definitions of ideal motherhood, expert prescriptions, and cultural and legal restrictions on women's autonomy. This was partly because mothers had been quietly shifting cultural and social patterns for many decades. In addition to making the aforementioned demands on government and shifting familial roles, twentieth-century women also increasingly adapted to modern life in two basic ways: practicing birth control and combining motherhood with paid labor.

> The almost all-male medical and psychology professions often belittled maternal knowledge.

Some of these changes were evident, though still not fully realized, by mid-century. In spite of still-active Comstock laws dating back to the 1870s, which prohibited information about birth control, more heterosexual couples were practicing birth control. For decades advertisers had offered women "regulator products" and suggested through prolific repetition, if not through effective or safe products, that reproduction could be controlled. Sanger's Planned Parenthood organization also expanded, helped along by the Great Depression. Disturbingly, as late as 1940, the most commonly used method of reproductive control in 1940 was the generally ineffective douche. But by the 1950s, the vast majority of middle-class families were using birth control with considerable effectiveness. Yes, they were having a baby boom, but women were largely completing

their child-bearing by age 30, opening up vistas of post-childrearing middle age for a generation of women, and exercising an unprecedented degree of "family planning" even as they were bombarded with rigid gender prescriptions and assertions that motherhood was women's only appropriate and true vocation.[11]

At the same time, the percentage of women having babies outside of marriage tripled between the 1940s and the late 1950s. Unmarried pregnant women became a critical social problem. The draconian menu of Cold War-era solutions included adoption (often coerced), unwanted marriages, social marginalization through single motherhood (accompanied by the stigma of non-marital sex), or obscenely unsafe and hard-to-procure abortions. The century-long sexual revolution and the possibilities for female autonomy meant that this social control of women could not be contained through these means beyond the Cold War era.[12]

In the 1960s mothers participated, in ways still often not recognized in general accounts of American history, in important rebellions against established authority of that era. The quiet revolutions of women's private lives as workers and child-bearers helped bring about a cultural revolution. The private shame of secret abortions, the humiliations of poverty, the devaluation of the maternal body and maternal labors, and even the cultural conflation of the idea of womanhood with the necessity of motherhood—all of these became fodder for new cultural questions.

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, organized mothers disrupted the culture of expertise and cultural patterns of privatizing, pathologizing, and economically disempowering American motherhood. Mothers of color expanded the possibilities of the Civil Rights movement and the War on Poverty to mobilize for community resources and demand economic and racial justice, in their children's schools, in the welfare system, and in the distribution of community resources. Peace activist organizations such as Women Strike for Peace questioned scientific positivism when they challenged the proliferation of nuclear weapons and how the by-products of nuclear testing affected the health of their children. Mothers became active in other environmental causes, motivated by issues of children's health.

In the same time span, second-wave feminism burst on the scene, shaking the foundations of gender ideology, demanding opportunities for meaningful public participation and reproductive rights for all women, and accomplishing major legislative victories to make this possible. In the span of less than two decades, Americans went from boxing women into rigid "June Cleaver" gender role ideals to contemplating the radical feminist call to "Bury Mother's Day": "Today, one day of the year, America is celebrating Motherhood," claimed radical Cleveland feminists in the early 1970s. They continued, "the other 364 days she preserves the apple pie of family life and togetherness and protects the sanctity of the male ego and profit. She lives through her husband and children...she is sacrificed on the alter of reproduction." The venerable Dr. Spock was probably stunned when Gloria Steinam confronted him with the accusation: "you have been a major oppressor of women."[13]

Demographic and cultural changes roiled through American society and culture in the decades since the 1970s, adding fuel to the fires of debates about motherhood and cracking old molds of mothering ideals. The age of marriage crept up; the baby boom was over. Women availed themselves of effective birth control and abortion, bore fewer children, and planned their families, education, and workforce participation in ways that would have astounded their foremothers. Many women chose not to marry or bear children at all. Single motherhood lost much of its stigma and became an undeniable demographic reality. By 2012 more than half of children born to women under the age of thirty had single mothers.[14] Lesbian mothers claimed their rights, and so did gay men, bisexual, and transgender individuals. More fathers embraced caregiving as compatible with their own identities and goals.

More than forty years after the challenges articulated by Steinam and the radical feminists and the *Roe v. Wade* decision, we are left to contemplate how seriously the foundations of American motherhood have been shaken, how deep the transformation goes, and where it will end. Beginning in the 1980s, Americans endured decades of "mommy wars" pitting at-home and working mothers against one another, and hysteria about whether women are, like the supposed "race suicide" agents of a century ago, abandoning motherhood. But it seems fair to say that as a culture, we have generally come to accept mothers' place in the labor force as, if nothing else, an economic necessity for most families. By 2015, 58.1 percent of mothers with children under age one were in the labor force; 74.8 percent of mothers with children under eighteen worked outside the home, including 67.7 percent of married women.[15] Women's reproductive rights are another matter; issues raised by *Roe v. Wade* have clearly not been settled, and polarization on this issue sometimes serves as a proxy for anxieties about the long-term changes in the lives of women and families.

Meanwhile, the downward push on wages, the rise of single motherhood, and neoliberal policies that have shredded families' safety net while attacking reproductive rights—all of these developments push back against the

possibilities of empowerment for mothers and caregivers of all genders. And the life chances of mothers and their children remain deeply divided by class and race inequality. Culturally speaking, the proliferation of tropes about "bad mothers"—bearing "crack babies" or cheating the welfare system—has contributed to these divisions.

Also limiting change has been the persistence of nineteenth-century ideals of motherhood as essential to womanhood and fundamentally different from fatherhood. Second-wave feminists emphatically called for gender equality in parenting, and fathers' involvement in childcare has increased, albeit in complex and incomplete ways. But "intensive mothering," the name sociologist Sharon Hays appropriately gave to the kind of do-it-all mothering promoted in the 1980s, undercut this revolution. Even as the labor force participation of mothers with young children increased dramatically, the dominant culture offered a motherhood that resurfaced nineteenth-century privatized, child-centered ideals, but added responsibilities for surveillance in a world perceived as unsafe for children and for consumer spending to enrich their children's lives. Rigid workplaces, which set career advancement on a male model and continued to underpay women, have also limited the revolutionary potential of feminist demands for shared parenting.[16]

Yet there are reasons to be optimistic about the potential for mothers to have a genuine say in the policy and culture that shape their circumstances, and for women to have a say in whether motherhood is necessary to their identities. Cultural revolutions seem far from completing their arc of change: ideal scripts for privatized, heterosexually-focused, gender-rigid economically disempowered motherhood have been decentered in the age of the internet and with the resurgence of powerful social justice movements. Demographic changes altering motherhood now combine with feminist, anti-racist, labor and LGBTQ movements to create new motherhood ideals and new demands for resources for all those who care of the next generation as well as for vulnerable adults. Even within male-dominated legislatures and courts, feminists have found allies to push through some meaningful policy changes, from family medical leave to reproductive rights protections. The fact that mothers—and women in general—remain grossly under-represented in places where decisions about their lives are made is profoundly problematic. And yet people—mostly women—whose lives have been shaped by the primary responsibility to care for others, are also slowly and painstakingly winding their way closer to the centers of political power, while continuing to push on the cultural front. Again and again, mothers have proven themselves adaptive, resourceful, and ready to mobilize to take responsibility for improving their children's lives, while also being willing to champion their own needs to live their lives on their own terms and to reshape our civic conversations. ■TAH■

ENDNOTES

This essay is adapted in part from Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood: An America History.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014. Copyright © 2014 by Jodi Vandenberg-Daves.

1. Quoted in Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1856* (1981), 159.
2. Quoted in Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890–1925* (1985), 124.
3. Quoted in Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (1994), 125.
4. Jodi Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood: An American History* (2014), 77.
5. Quoted in Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work,* 142.
6. Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 106.
7. Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 129.
8. Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (2006).
9. Quoted in Apple, *Perfect Motherhood,* 39.
10. Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 178–79.
11. See Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 129–38 and 173–95 passim.
12. See Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 195–09 passim.
13. Quoted in Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties* (1996), 38; quoted in Ann Hulbert, *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice about Children* (2003), 269.
14. Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 250.
15. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Characteristics of American Families," April 22, 2016.
16. See Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996); Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood,* 258–62, and Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (2004).