

## A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Feminist Agenda for Valuing Care-Work

*Feminism has a long history of fighting for economic independence for women. First-wave Australian feminists sought motherhood endowment on the basis of women's difference from men, but gained child endowment. Second wave feminists emphasised equality rather than difference, and made enormous gains in women's access to labour markets. However the goal of economic independence remains elusive, especially for women who become mothers. This article explores the links between contemporary concerns with valuing care-work, "balancing" work and family responsibilities, and economic independence for mothers. It discusses what would be distinctive about a third wave feminist agenda for change, taking account of our experiences of the gains of earlier changes, and the early twenty-first century socio-political context. A proposed third wave agenda would incorporate the unfinished business of second wave feminism including high quality accessible affordable childcare, gender equity and paid parental leave, as well as a system of payments to parents that would value care-work as well as facilitating and rewarding labour market earning. It would include equity between parents and non-parents as well as gender equity, and would respond to the diverse aspirations and desires of contemporary women.*

In Australia, as in many other places around the world, we are struggling with questions of how to value caring work, and how to enable people with caring responsibilities for children to be, in Belinda Probert's words, "both the parents and the workers we want to be" (2001: 1). In this article I identify two ways of valuing care-work: intangible and tangible. I discuss the importance of valuing each of these aspects in an appropriate way. In relation to work and family, I challenge the notion of "balance", and discuss the idea that responsibility for caring for young children is a matter of equity between parents and non-parents, as well as a matter of gender equity. These matters are profoundly

relevant to the long-term feminist goal of economic independence for women. I discuss how a third wave feminist agenda for change might differ from earlier agendas, placing this third wave agenda in the context of some earlier Australian twentieth-century feminist activism and theorising.

My own interest in these matters comes from my attempts at feminist praxis in my own life, and I have woven accounts of my experiences and reflections into the text. I refer to mothers and mothering in relation to the care of young children because it is mothers who carry out the vast bulk of this work. This does not imply an acceptance of the social arrangements that give mothers little choice in this matter.

### **Valuing care-work**

Mothering has a strangely ambiguous status, being treated as simultaneously priceless and worthless. In seeking to understand this ambiguous status, it is useful to acknowledge that mothering care-work involves both love, an intangible, and labour, a tangible. Cultural ambivalence about the value of mothering reflects the high value placed on mother-love, and the low value placed on mother-work. Personal ambivalence about mothering may reflect the way the love traps us in the work. The institution of motherhood (Rich, 1976, 1986) and the ideology of motherhood (Wearing, 1984) trap women, as the love we feel for our children compels us to accept the undervaluing of our labour.

Like care-work, the concept of “value” has both an intangible and a tangible meaning. Intangible values are our commitments and beliefs, those things we hold dear. Money cannot buy the love and devotion that mothers typically put into raising their children, nor can they be quantified. (An important question in relation to mother-love is whether it is necessarily linked to gender, and the embodied experiences of childbearing, but this and related questions are beyond the scope of this paper.) The tangible meaning of “value” relates to whether an activity is worthy of recompense. Paid work, business, voluntary work and the labour involved in caring for children can all be valued in terms of the time spent, the capital invested, and the cost of the raw materials involved.

I would suggest that if we want to improve the valuing of the intangibles of mothering we are looking for cultural change, and if we want to improve the valuing of the tangibles of mothering we are seeking economic system change. My focus in this article is on the tangibles, while keeping awareness of the intangibles in the background. Other recent Australian work such as that of Anne Manne (2005) foregrounds the intangibles.

The labour, the tangible work involved in caring for young children, takes time (Craig, 2004, 2002), and that time is consequently not available for labour market earning. This important realisation provides the link between the valuing of care-work and the issue of work-family balance. If we undervalue or underestimate the time taken to care for young children, we might think that

a mother can easily undertake full-time paid work as well as caring for children, especially if we think only of the intangibles of care-work. This fallacy is embedded in the notion of “quality time”—the idea that quantity of time is irrelevant.

### **Balancing work and family**

The pressures facing people who have both family responsibilities and paid work are often referred to as “work-family balance”. Unfortunately the term “balance” suggests that one might achieve this state by individual ingenuity and commitment, as with an aspiration to a balanced diet. It depoliticises the issue and puts responsibility on to the individual rather than the social arrangements that make this lack of “balance” a social problem rather than an individual matter.

In June 2005, Pru Goward, Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, released a discussion paper entitled *Striking the balance: Women, men, work and family*, and invited public submissions on the topic. Goward *et al.* (2005) express the hope that community consultation and preparation of a further paper will contribute towards more equitable social arrangements in the future. They recognise that this is more than an individual matter. However, they couch the issue in terms of gender equity, implying that if men would do their fair share we could solve this problem. Goward *et al.* (2005) are very aware of the parental time spent on caring for children, and they see this work as having value. However they stop short of stating that this work has an economic value for the rest of the community and is deserving of recompense (Folbre, 2005). In contrast, Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (1997) see the rest of the community as free-riders on the labour of mothers. Acknowledging that raising children provides an economic benefit to the rest of the community makes this a matter of equity between parents and non-parents as well as a matter of gender equity.

### **Economic independence for mothers of young children**

For centuries, feminists have emphasised the importance of economic independence for women (Spender, 1983). This means access as individuals in our own right rather than as dependants of men to the resources to sustain life. Through most of the twentieth century, Australian social policy and industrial relations treated women as gendered family members to be supported by males.

In this article I focus in particular on the situation of mothers of young children. This is for three inter-related reasons. First, the undervaluing of mothers’ work in caring for young children could be seen as both cause and consequence of the undervaluing of women’s labour in general. If women will work for nothing, perhaps their work is worth nothing. If women’s work is of little value, then their time consumed in the care of young children is of little consequence. The second reason is that care of a young child takes 60-90 hours of someone’s time (Bittman and Pixley, 1997). This is much more than a

normal working week, and full-time childcare replaces only a small proportion of this time (Craig, 2002). Thus it is extremely difficult for a mother with a young child to earn sufficient labour market income to achieve economic independence. The third reason is that childbearing has both a short-term and a long-term impact on mothers' incomes. Matthew Gray and Bruce Chapman (2001) estimate that Australian women with one child lose about 34 percent of their lifetime earnings, increasing to around 40 percent for those with three children.

Second wave feminists sought access to paid employment as a way to achieve more autonomy and control in their own lives. Western women now have better access than ever before to education and employment. However Australian women do not enjoy the same level of economic independence as Australian men (Summers, 2003). Greater labour market participation has brought tension between the demands of paid work and family responsibilities (Goward *et al.*, 2005).

Paid work and family responsibilities relate to each other in complex ways. For women, especially following the impacts of second-wave feminism, participation in paid employment has been both a source of fulfilment and symbolic equality with men, and a way of achieving economic independence. Family responsibilities have been both the motivation for women with children to earn income to support the family either fully or partially, and the source of frustration in women's efforts to develop careers and earnings.

### **Feminist activism and theorising**

The past century has seen major changes in the socio-political context of feminist activism and theorising. First wave feminists fought for and won the vote, and then set about using the suffrage to achieve change, often on the basis of women's distinctive role in life or difference from men. Second wave feminists emphasised equality with men, particularly in the labour market, and shied away from claims on the basis of difference. Third wave feminism could be seen as bringing together claims for both equality and difference in relation to men, as well as emphasising issues of justice across differences in race, class and culture as well as gender. A third wave feminist agenda for change must respond to the current socio-political context, which has been shaped, among other influences, by earlier feminist activism and theorising. It must also relate to the diverse aspirations and desires of contemporary women.

Early in the twentieth century most Australian feminists argued for a style of economic independence that accepted different social roles for women and men. "[Women activists] made a particular case that the state should support those who worked as mothers, providing them with an income which would free them from a demeaning dependence on husbands" (Lake, 1999: 56). Post-suffrage feminists fought for and gained some improvements in mothers' economic and legal circumstances, including the introduction, in 1912, of a Maternity Allowance, a one-off payment of five pounds, equivalent to around

five weeks wages for a woman. Reflecting the widespread racism of the time, it explicitly excluded mothers who were “Asiatics” or “Aboriginal natives of Australia, Papua or the islands of the Pacific” (Lake, 1999: 56).

In the 1920s, feminists successfully defended the Maternity Allowance against politicians and the medical establishment who sought to abolish or slash it. To their disappointment, in the 1930s a Labor federal government reduced the allowance to four pounds and introduced a means test, moving it towards being a targeted welfare benefit rather than a right or recompense. Lake (1999) summarises the disappointment:

It became all too evident that the state was more responsive to demands for an increase in resources for babies and children—the future citizens—than to improving the wellbeing of current women citizens ... Authorised to enter the public domain as the protectors of children, feminists found that in the longer term the cause rebounded on them, as the welfare of children became the justification to undermine the rights of mothers. (82)

World War II removed men from their places of employment, and industry needed women to take their places. Women increased their wages in some industries from 54 percent to 90 percent of male wages, and state-regulated childcare facilities were established. However, following the war, childcare centres closed and women experienced ideological pressure to return to unpaid domestic roles in order that men returning from the war could have the jobs. With the post-war baby boom, high wages for men, and the increase in Australian suburban living, quintessential 1950s domesticity blossomed (Curlewis, 1984; Matthews, 1984).

My own mother was part of this post-war milieu. She married my father in 1942, during the war. In their wedding photograph he is in Royal Australian Air Force uniform, and she looks slightly stunned. She was nineteen years old at the time, and a qualified primary school teacher. As a married woman, despite the fact that her husband departed immediately for training in Canada and subsequent service based in Britain, she was required to resign from her position with the State of Queensland teaching service. She took other paid work while he was away. After his return four years later, she had four children. She would have liked to return to teaching, but my father was very much against it. He finally agreed in 1966 to her taking a teaching position, on the condition that he never saw any of the money she earned. Throughout her life, my mother was adamant that she was not a feminist. However she was certainly indignant about women’s condition, and determined that her daughters should have education and opportunities in life. I still recall being intrigued and excited as an eleven year old when I discovered in 1961 that she had refused to classify herself as “housewife” on the census form, describing herself instead as “household manager.”

By the late 1960s and early 1970s a groundswell of women's dissatisfaction with the conditions of their lives became second-wave feminism. At this time, feminists focused on the relationship between women's roles within families and their lack of labour market earning, moving very explicitly away from earlier claims for state-provided incomes for mothers. The "wages for housework" campaign was an attempt to gain economic independence for women and recognition for the value of the work undertaken by housewives. Ann Oakley (1974) argued persuasively against the campaign and the role of housewife:

Proposals in favour of a "housewife's wage" are made today by both liberationists and anti-liberationists. The liberationist advocates wages for housework because she sees it as crucial recognition of women's traditional unpaid labour in the home, and a step in the improvement of women's social status. Anti-liberationists argue for the same development on different premises. Their premise is one of "hygiene": that woman's place is, and should be, in the home, and everything should be done to make it as pleasant as possible. This is the crux of the argument: if housewives are paid, the status quo will be maintained. A system of state payment for the woman-housewife's labour in the home will recognize and perpetuate the validity of the equation woman = housewife. (226-7)

In an important distinction, she continues:

Many proposals for a housewife's wage are actually proposals for paid child rearing. This is a different matter altogether. Since the state invests so much money in the education of children (beyond the magic age of school entry) and in child health and development generally, it is reasonable to suggest that some financial recognition should be given to the childcare role of the parent in the home. (227)

Second-wave feminism brought explicit discussion of the role of families in women's oppression and exploitation. Views varied from those who saw heterosexual nuclear families as so destructive to women that they should be abandoned entirely, to those who called for change but not total abandonment of existing family forms. Authors including Shulamith Firestone (1970), Germaine Greer (1970), Kate Millett (1970), and Juliet Mitchell (1971) put a name to the oppressions suffered by women, and set an agenda for liberation. Refusing to fulfill sex role stereotypes and demanding full access to the labour market were important aspects of that agenda, clearly drawing more on a concept of "equality" than "difference." Marilyn Lake (1999) comments on this shift:

Feminists generally advocated a combination of different reforms to

achieve economic independence: legislation to require husbands to share their family wage and to grant ownership to wives of household savings; motherhood endowment and later a supporting parent's benefit; the public provision of childcare; and equal pay or the rate for the job. As it became clear that the only way women would enjoy their own income was by following men into the labour market, so "equality"—in wages, opportunities and conditions—became feminism's defining goal. (4-5)

My own feminist identification and expression in the 1970s took the form Ferree (1990) describes as typical of the time—rejection of sex-role stereotypes. I had two young children, and I studiously encouraged them in non-stereotypical play and language. My daughter had trucks and a treehouse. My son had a doll called Sam. I referred to the crossing sign at traffic lights as "the green person." For myself, I tried to maintain a professional identity by having paid work one day per week. I was my own handy person around the house and tried to encourage my then husband to share in the household chores. On one occasion I left the washing up for a whole week in the expectation that he would eventually get desperate and do it, but this strategy failed and I eventually purchased a dishwasher.

Housework, motherhood and women's traditional handcrafts fell into a kind of feminist disrepute. My own experience of second-wave feminism included a suppression of stereotypically feminine activities. This pressure could be characterised as "Don't mention the children and don't knit in public". I recall a feminist gathering where the guest speaker gave a glowing account of having recently become a grandmother. I found her enthusiasm sweet and touching, but she received a stony reception from the gathered feminists.

Second-wave feminist critique of the institution of the family included attention to motherhood and mothering. Feminists criticised conventional child development theory (e.g. Bowlby, 1963; Winnicott, 1965) with its emphasis on the well-being of the child, with the mother as agent for the society, rather than possessing her own agency (Everingham, 1994). Second-wave feminism brought a dramatic shift from the focus on the experience of the infant/child to the experience of motherhood, from the point of view of the mother (for example Oakley, 1979; Rich, 1976, 1986; Wearing, 1984).

At the same time as second wave feminist activists were fighting for recognition as full persons, equal access to employment, anti-discrimination legislation and formal childcare (Lake, 1999), feminist theorising of the late 1970s and 1980s included a shift from sex role theory to gender theory (Ferree, 1990) and a re-valourising of mothering (Rich, 1976).

Sex role theory identified the nuclear family as the originator and enforcer of sex role stereotypes. Gender theory shifted the focus to include the broader institutions and culture as enforcers of the gender system (Ferree, 1990). Black feminists challenged the understandings of family, drawing attention to their

experiences of families as sites of resistance, solidarity and comfort in the face of racism (O'Reilly, 2004). This increasing complexity and diversity in understandings of families could be seen as part of a transition from second-wave feminism influenced by modernism to a third-wave feminism that has become part of post-modernity.

Feminist theory re-valorising mothering brought more complexity and diversity to understandings of women's aspirations and desires. Later work has built on Adrienne Rich's (1976, 1986) distinction between motherhood as challenging and rewarding experience and the oppressive and exploitative institution of motherhood. Australian Betsy Wearing (1984) reflected on the ideology of motherhood that obscures the lived experiences of women who are responsible for children.

Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick (1990) expressed a strong social and political focus in her reaffirmation of the value of mothering. Ruddick claims that maternal practices produce a valuable perspective that is lacking in public affairs. Similarly, Carol Gilligan's (1982) work explores the way that women's moral development and awareness was left out of past theorising, and she explores, describes and values women's "ethic of care."

The 1990s and early 2000s have produced what could be seen as "protest" or "breaking the silence" literature. Stephanie Brown *et al.* (1994) found that becoming a mother had a profound impact on women, as they experienced themselves and the world in new and unimagined ways. In addition, the study showed that women often experience isolation, lack of support and lack of preparation for the demands of caring for a baby.

Australian-based Susan Maushart (1997:47) writes that "mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences." She claims that second-wave feminism washed over motherhood, leaving its contours remarkably intact. However, she says, women's lives have changed dramatically, from the "tranquillised," empty lives that Betty Friedan described to lives of "juggling" multiple expectations and responsibilities. She states that "our thinking about motherhood as a role and as an institution has become hopelessly muddled over the course of the past two generations," citing ambivalence about day care as an example (Maushart, 1997: 12; see also Probert, 2001).

Barbara Pocock (2001) states:

Women are trying to do more, especially in paid work, and the tensions are well known. The surprising thing is the lack of real change. And it is far from obvious that the next generation of women—through better choices, the deferral or refusal of motherhood, or smaller families—will do better.

...

Despite well-assembled evidence of pressure, there has been all too little real change in workplaces, kitchens and households. Women's



guilt—so widespread and striking—is an indicator of the privatised nature of the present pursuit of balance, and the privatised nature of disappointment that individuals alone can't always achieve it. (14)

### **A third wave feminist agenda for change**

A third wave feminist agenda would include economic independence for women, as this goal has not been achieved, nor has it lost its relevance. Valuing caring work, and resolving tensions between family and employment responsibilities are necessary foundations for change that will give mothers of young children opportunities for economic independence in the short term and greater economic equity with both men and non-parents in the longer term.

The post-suffrage feminists who fought for motherhood endowment won child endowment. These payments were intended to ensure the health and development of children, the nation's future, rather than recognising the work of mothers. Second-wave feminists rejected the idea of wages for housework, and achieved vastly improved access to paid employment for women. A third wave feminist agenda for change must be grounded in the work and wisdom of earlier generations, and in our experiences of the gains they achieved. It must address the further issues that those gains revealed as well as including the claims that have been only partially realised, such as childcare and paid maternity leave.

As with earlier generations, third wave feminist activism must respond to the current socio-political environment, and will incorporate at least some of the themes of feminist theorising. A full discussion of these topics is beyond the scope of this article. However some points are particularly relevant here. The socio-political environment includes a less rigid gender system than in earlier times. Young women grow up with more of a sense of entitlement to a life of their own than previous generations. Fathers are spending more time with their children (Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Craig, 2002). I recall that in the 1960s Australian fathers generally avoided anything to do with the care of young children. The fathers I knew in regional Queensland would not have been seen walking down the street pushing a pram, and changing nappies was definitely women's work. My personal contact with Australian fathers suggests that many now expect to play a much more active part in their children's lives.

In relation to feminist theorising, we can bring together principles of equality and difference, rather than seeing them as incompatible with each other. In addition, we are aware of the need for social provisions that are flexible, empowering women to live their lives in diverse ways. Such provisions must take account of the diversity of women's desires and aspirations in relation to employment and mothering.

The gains of second wave feminism have highlighted the role of mothers' unpaid work in resourcing the raising of the next generation. A third wave feminist agenda would include recompense for that work, in a way that would open up options rather than trapping women in domestic roles. Nancy Folbre

(2005) has recently suggested that government payments to parents should be seen as payments for services rather than as welfare. This is clearly at odds with second wave feminists' concerns that wages for mothers would essentialise women and trap them in the domestic sphere. However, there is some evidence that we have moved on culturally to a place where being trapped in the role of housewife is no longer such a threat as it was at the height of second wave feminism. At that time the work of mothering was very integrated with housework, but the distinction between the two is now clearer. We could argue that everyone generates housework, and it is reasonable self-care that everyone should do some housework. Caring for young children is different. It produces a public benefit and it is reasonable that the whole community should contribute to the costs of this work (Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Crittenden, 2001; Folbre, 2005, 2001). Cultural change towards men wanting to participate much more than earlier generations in the hands-on care of their babies reduces the likelihood of women being essentialized and trapped in housewife roles. If the work of caring for young children received recompense as a service to the rest of the community, it may increase men's take-up of these activities, as increased wages have done in occupations such as nursing and social work. Of course, it may seem threatening to some women to give up control over their children's care, especially given the inferior access that women have to labour market earning and career advancement.

It could well be that Australia's current social arrangements are more likely than payment for caring for their own children to trap women in "career" motherhood. These social arrangements make it difficult for mothers to combine earning and caring, and offer incentives for partnered mothers to stay out of the labour market. However caring for young children is not a life-long career. It is clear from time use and labour market participation data that babies and toddlers take up huge hours mothers' time. Except for children with special needs, that time demand drops off as children grow. We need much more research into the work involved in caring for children of different ages, in order to determine what would be reasonable recompense for the care of children of different ages. We can learn from Scandinavian experiences with generous parental leave and universal childcare provisions (Haavind and Magnusson, 2005). It seems likely that such provisions, along with good access to education and training after childbearing would increase mothers' labour market earning after their youngest child is three years of age. If parents were paid for their services in raising children, these payments would not have the same conditions as apply to welfare payments. They would not be means tested against a partner's income. They would not be lost if a mother or father receiving the payment took some employment and paid for alternative care. They could be structured to have some of the characteristics of wages, for example accumulation of superannuation (retirement pay), and some of the characteristics of service contracts, for example freedom from close day-to-day supervision.

A third wave feminist agenda for change must recognise that caring for

children is valuable, not only because it is precious, important and worth doing, but because it takes up time. Looking after children is not “doing nothing.” There are costs involved that are at present borne unfairly by mothers. An agenda for change must include a way to redistribute the costs to those who benefit from the unpaid work that mothers put into the care of their children. Clearly, women will have many different preferences about how they arrange their lives. Economic independence for mothers of young children would open up choices and possibilities, increasing options for paid work, study, recreation, and active citizenship. The changes we seek for the future must relate to the diverse aspirations and desires of contemporary women.

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