

Feminism and Stay-at-Home-Motherhood: Some Critical Reflections and Implications for Mothers on Social Assistance

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ABSTRACT

Feminism has not dealt adequately with issues of stay-at-home motherhood. Most feminists have seen the only solution for mothers' economic vulnerability as being decent paid work and adequate daycare. This ignores the real desires of some women to remain home with young children, alienating many mothers from feminism and failing to provide useful analysis to support those mothers on social assistance now being forced into the workforce by the welfare "reforms" of neo-liberal governments.

RÉSUMÉ

Le féminisme n'a pas traité adéquatement les questions des mères qui restent à la maison. La plupart des féministes n'ont vu qu'une solution à la vulnérabilité économique des mères comme étant un emploi bien rémunéré et des garderies adéquates. Ceci ignore les désirs réels de certaines femmes de rester à la maison avec leurs jeunes enfants, aliénant bien des mères du féminisme et ne donnant pas une analyse utile pour appuyer ces mères qui sont sur le bien-être social qui sont maintenant forcées à entrer le marché du travail par les réformes du bien-être social des gouvernements néo-libéraux.

Feminism and motherhood have had a complex and in many ways troubled history. This history goes back at least as far as the late nineteenth century, when early feminists felt that as "mothers of the race" they could speak for all women, rich and poor, black and white, and could present solutions that would work for all women and for all mothers. Despite current feminist recognition of diversity among women, there is little acceptance of diversity when it comes to stay-at-home mothers. This has alienated many mothers from feminism and leaves us without the ability, and indeed without the conceptual tools, to adequately defend the many low income stay-at-home mothers who are currently being forced into the workforce by fiscally conservative governments.

I write this piece as a women's historian, a socialist feminist and the pregnant mother of a six year old. I realize that staying home is not an option that many women can choose, and one that many others (including myself) would not choose. Certainly the current conditions under which many stay-at-home mothers parent - of isolation, frustration, lack of social status, community support and income of one's own - would dissuade many from taking on this role, even if they had the

material resources to do so. However, I think that becoming a mother has given me some sense of the powerful emotional reasons why many women with young children do want to stay home, or work part-time while their children are small, as I have done.

In this article I bring together strands of feminist discussions (and silences) about stay-at-home motherhood that have thus far remained largely separate. I focus primarily on Canada, but also use American and European material where it is relevant, discussing the work of women's historians, feminist theorists, activist mothers and feminist scholars of the welfare state. I am not trying to present new empirical evidence here, but instead seek to help nudge feminism out of the conceptual box it has been in regarding full-time unpaid mothering, to recognize the limitations this has placed on feminist imagination and vision, and in particular to identify the risks this approach currently poses for mothers on social assistance. While my focus here is on stay-at-home mothers and mothers working part time, I want to caution that many mothers cycle between full-time employment, part time employment and staying at home with their children over their lives, making it dangerous

to dichotomize too firmly between different groups of mothers.

A major feminist solution to deal with the inequities that child-raising creates for women has been the equal sharing of childcare with male partners. While sharing childrearing with male partners has dramatically lightened the burden of childcare for some women, repeated studies show that women continue to do the bulk of childcare in most heterosexual families (Baker and Tippin 1999, 48; Crittenden 2001, 23-26; Luxton and Corman 2001, 30 & 189-199; Ribbens 1994, 2). This paper focuses on stay-at-home mothers, because despite an increase in the number of stay-at-home fathers in recent years, fathers who stay at home, or even take a short-term parental leave, remain a very small minority. As of 1997 women made up 94% of all stay-at-home parents in Canada, while in the United States children under 15 were 56 times more likely to live with a stay-at-home mother than with a stay-at-home father (Marshall 1998, 11; Williams 2003).

Most Canadians making difficult decisions about the balance between paid work and family are mothers. In 1998 almost 40% of Canadian women with children under six were not employed in the paid work force, while 23% of women aged 25-44 were employed part time, as compared to 5% of men. Almost 31% of women aged 25-44 who worked part time stated that they did so in order to care for children, as compared to 1.5% of men (Freiler et al. 2001, 13). Jane Lewis has noted that in Britain 90% of women with children who work part time do not want full-time work (2001). Women may be making these decisions partly in response to social or family pressure, or the lack of adequate quality daycare. Lewis suggests, however, that in the British context even "if good-quality affordable child care were to be provided overnight, it is not clear that all women would want to work full time"(2001, 158). Similarly, in the American context, Ann Crittenden has interviewed many mothers, primarily women in professional, managerial or academic jobs, who have decided to stay at home with their children, or to work part time. Most of these women regretted having to leave jobs that they enjoyed and had worked hard to achieve, but were not willing to let the unreasonable time demands of their jobs keep them from what they saw as the joys and emotional satisfaction of raising their children (2001, 28-39). In both Canada

and the United States women with lower occupational and educational levels were most likely to be stay-at-home mothers, but in both countries stay-at-home mothers were found in all occupational and educational brackets. For example, in 1997 25% of Canadian stay-at-home mothers had been in managerial/professional positions, as compared to 39% of mothers in the paid workforce (Marshall 1998, 14). While Canadian mothers have access to better maternity/parental leaves than their US counterparts, many still opt to stay home with their children. Recent work suggests that for many women the decision to work part time or to stay home with preschool children reflects deeply felt emotional desires (Crittenden 2001; Freiler 2001; Marks and Vibert 2001; Mothers Are Women (MAW) 1999; PAR-L 2001). Most current feminist analysis has not looked closely at these women's realities.

Feminist work, particularly from the early second wave movement, vividly revealed the claustrophobia and emotional damage that staying home with small children could create for women who had no other options (Friedan 1963; Lazarre 1976; Rich 1986; Snitow 1992, 35-36). More recent work has focused on many of the complexities of mothering, acknowledging both its joys and frustrations, and struggling with the contradictions mothering creates between women's autonomy and caring roles. This work, however, has had little to say specifically about stay-at-home mothers (Glenn et al. 1994; Hanigsberg and Ruddick 1999; Held 1995; Ribbens 1994, 27-29; Ross 1995). Socialist feminists have studied stay-at-home mothers as part of their important analysis of women's unpaid work, including motherwork, housework and a range of other essential caring activities. They argue that the fact that women have done and continue to do most of this crucial, unpaid, undervalued work is a major source of women's oppression (Fox 1998; Hamilton and Barrett 1986; Luxton 1980; Ursel 1992).

While most feminist work notes that over the last twenty years increasing numbers of mothers are entering the workforce from economic need and in many cases the desire for more autonomy, creativity and adult association, only a minority discuss the fact that some women are actively choosing to stay home with their children. For some feminist scholars these choices are hard to understand. For example, in her study of family day

care providers Margaret Nelson notes the "ferocity" of these women's commitment to be at home with their children while they are growing up, finding it "somewhat surprising" at a time when "increasing numbers of women work outside the home and leave their children in the care of others" (Glenn et al. 1994, 191). Carol Sanger, in a discussion focused primarily on mothers and paid work, presents a more unusual feminist perspective, noting that "I suspect that even under a regime where mothers could leave children for work as freely and with the same kinds of encouragement as fathers, many women would choose to mother away with the same intensity and devotion as they do today. Having, caring for, and loving children is for many an incomparable source of satisfaction. Yet other mothers, mothers who also love their children, may find a regime in which work is regarded as an acceptable activity for mothers liberating" (Hanigsberg and Ruddick 1999, 113). This kind of recognition and acceptance of diversity in mothers' decisions around paid work and caregiving is unfortunately quite rare in the feminist literature.

If we look back to the first wave women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we see a similar inability to recognize the diversity of mothers' experiences and needs. First wave feminists were primarily middle-class white women who worked for greater gender equality and also lobbied for state policies that would assist poorer women and children (Koven and Michel 1993; Ladd-Taylor 1994). They were generally unenthusiastic about childcare as a solution to the problems facing poor single mothers, arguing that childcare was not good for the children and made life too difficult for mothers who had to take on a double day. Reflecting the contemporary domestic ideology, these reformers felt strongly that the primary role for both middle and working-class white mothers was as caregivers in the home. To enable poor women to fulfill the same role as their middle-class sisters, they lobbied for the introduction of mothers' pensions, payments by the state to poor single mothers to allow them to stay at home to raise their children. These feminist reformers have been critiqued for focusing only on programs that reinforced women's role as unpaid caregivers in the home, while failing to improve women's position in the paid workforce (Little 1998; Michel 1993; Ursel 1992).

More recently historians have recognized that despite the motivations of early reformers, many state welfare programs for poor single mothers required them to enter the paid workforce, to supplement inadequate government support. Many poor mothers protested vehemently against their need to take on paid work, since they believed it was crucial that they stay-at-home to raise their children or care for other dependents (Abel 1998; Christie 2000, 131-159).

I would argue that the second wave women's movement has gone to the other extreme from first wave feminists. Whereas mothers' pensions to allow mothers to stay home were once the answer, now most feminists seem to believe that the primary social policy solution for mothers is decent paid work, supported by excellent daycare. The fact that there are still many mothers who feel that staying home to raise their children is the right option for them is not part of this feminist paradigm.

Both socialist and liberal feminists have argued over the last thirty years that women who stay at home to raise their children leave themselves economically vulnerable, particularly in the case of a husband's death or divorce. This analysis remains very relevant, as recent studies reveal (Crittenden 2001; Folbre 2001; Luxton and Corman 2001). However, the solution proposed by most liberal and socialist feminists remains a unitary one: mothers should be in the paid workforce, and appropriate policies, like adequate daycare, pay equity and job training should make it possible for them to find decent, well-paying work. As Luxton and Vosko note "large scale feminist organizing in Canada continues to avoid addressing the thorny issue of unpaid labour directly. Rather, work-related feminist initiatives concentrate on women's situations in paid employment" (Luxton and Vosko 1998, 52).

Canadian feminists have moved further than most Americans on this issue. American feminists focus almost exclusively on women's equality in the context of the workplace (Crittenden 2001), while a few Canadian feminist organizations have been very active in the struggle to value and count unpaid work, including a major campaign to have unpaid work included in the 1996 Census (Luxton and Vosko 1998; MAW 1999). A few feminist voices are also starting to identify social policy solutions that can improve women's economic position as stay-at-home mothers (Freiler

et al. 2001). However, the eminently rational and materialist argument that mothers should be in the workplace "for their own good" remains powerful among North American feminists. For liberal feminists true equality is to be found only through equality in the workplace (Bashevkin 2002; Bryson 1992; Eisenstein 1981). While socialist feminists do not focus their attention on women achieving high ranking management positions, there is a clear sense that workforce participation is a better option for women than stay-at-home motherhood (Armstrong and Armstrong 1984; Fox 1998; Ursel 1992). Luxton and Corman's recent important socialist feminist study on working-class work and family life in Hamilton, Ontario demonstrates clearly the burden that working for pay full time while having major family responsibilities has for women, but the authors still appear to see this as the best option, since they argue that if mothers stay at home this renders them economically dependent and vulnerable, as well as reinforcing their subordination (Luxton and Corman 2001, 56). In rational, materialist terms this is all true. However, it does not acknowledge the preference that many women continue to demonstrate to remain at home with their children.

It is perhaps not surprising that many mothers believe that the women's movement does not reflect their needs or their realities. Younger mothers who are staying home with their children, or taking on part-time or freelance work to give them more time with their children, are often very critical of the women's movement's reluctance to acknowledge their choices as legitimate. Increasing numbers, both in Canada and the United States, are speaking out on the joys as well as the frustrations of full-time mothering, and on their critique of the women's movement. Some of these mothers are conventionally middle-class, and some certainly attack the women's movement from a conservative religious approach to traditional gender roles. However, many reflect a diverse range of more progressive perspectives (Crittenden 2001; Owens 1999). They include the women associated with Mothers Are Women, a Canadian feminist group of stay-at-home mothers that has done considerable advocacy work around counting and valuing unpaid work, particularly mothering. This group notes that "the feminist movement remains uncomfortable with the idea of a woman being a committed at-home

mother and a feminist" (cited in Luxton and Vosko 1998, 67).

Perhaps the most interesting contemporary voices on mothering are those associated with Ariel Gore's *Hip Mama* zine and website. These women see themselves as radical, alternative, and often poor and struggling (Gore 1998; Gore and Lavender 2001; Rowe-Finkbeiner 2002; www.hipmama.com). Most see themselves as feminists, and they have a strong critique of mainstream ideals of the "good" mother and the institution of motherhood that sometimes echo Adrienne Rich (Rich 1986; Chandler 1998). These women include a mix of mothers at home and in part- and full-time paid work. Gore notes in her *Hip Mama Survival Guide* that while full-time paid work and mothering is the answer for some women: "Hating your job and feeling like you'd rather be home sucks...I know plenty of mamas who work their butts off for eight or more hours a day basically just to pay their child care providers. Call me a Commie but that's oppression." Gore is not unrealistic about the difficulties of surviving without full-time work and discusses the poverty facing many single mothers in a gritty and realistic way. Nonetheless she advocates trying to develop a mix of part-time and free lance work to survive, noting that "not having a real job probably won't end up being any less stressful than whatever you're doing now, but being happy and stressed is a lot more fun than being miserable and stressed" (Gore 1998, 160-163 & 192-228).

Some of those writing for *Hip Mama* have the resources to stay home full time with their children and they defend this choice against what they see as received feminist dogma. For example, in a recent article Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner notes that: "The empowering feminist message of 'Girl, you can do anything' seems to suddenly stop when you choose to stay at home with children...But this is a choice that still needs to be included in feminism. Many recent feminist writings have looked down upon women who choose to stay home with children....Newsflash: It's a new millennium and full-time parenting is a choice for many of us, not a prison..." (2002, 31).

The dominant feminist analysis of stay-at-home motherhood not only alienates many younger mothers, but also has serious political implications in the current social policy context. This is particularly clear in relation to class issues. For

socialist feminists, the assumption that the choice to stay home is one available only to privileged middle-class mothers has helped to justify dismissing this as a serious issue. Perhaps even more significant for most Canadian feminists is the fear that feminist acceptance of the possibility of women staying home to care for their children will play into a right wing agenda. Most on the right do believe women should stay home with their children, in patriarchal heterosexual nuclear families, regardless of their personal preference. However, such arguments are increasingly class based. Many conservatives now argue that middle-class mothers should stay home, but working-class mothers, especially single mothers on welfare who are seen as setting a bad example in welfare dependency for their children, should be forced into the workforce (Bashevkin 2002; Mink 1995, 174-191; Mink 2002; Richards 1997).

The fact that the voices of stay-at-home mothers have been largely absent from feminist analysis has had serious implications for many working-class mothers, particularly poor single mothers. Many female lone parents who wish to stay home to raise their children have in the past had no choice but to put up with a humiliating, intrusive and inadequate system of social assistance. I am not saying that all, or even most mothers on social assistance are there simply because they wish to stay at home to raise their children. We don't know enough about this issue. Absences in the feminist theoretical literature around the subject of stay-at-home mothers helps to explain why this question is rarely asked. However, a 1988 Canadian study found that 30% of single mothers with children under 13 did not want to take a job because they wanted to stay home to care for their children (Lero and Brockman 1993, 105), while a recent study of Ontario and Quebec mothers on social assistance found that raising their children gave these women a sense of meaning, satisfaction and self-worth that was far more positive than the feelings they associated with job seeking (Deniger et.al 1995, 87-88). The Executive Director of Victoria's Single Parent Resource Centre recently noted that current British Columbia welfare cuts have made it impossible for those women on social assistance who wish to stay at home to raise their children to continue to do so (Copeland 2002). Of course these women are mothering in a context in which quality

affordable childcare is extremely limited and existing training programs at best provide access to dead-end and poorly-paid jobs. Many and perhaps most single mothers on social assistance would prefer to enter the paid workforce if well paid work and affordable daycare were available to them. However, for at least some poor women full-time motherwork is viewed as a more life affirming, creative and valuable alternative to boring, repetitive low wage work (Evans 1996; Mink 1995). In the 1970s in the United States women on social assistance who were involved with various welfare rights organizations affirmed their right to welfare in terms of the importance and value of their child-rearing work, arguing that this work was "socially necessary and praiseworthy" (Fraser and Gordon 1997, 141). One welfare rights activist argued that "I am a professional. I am a mother and motherhood is the most honorable and revered profession this world has ever known. It is also a position that is deserving the utmost respect" (Solinger 2001, 175-176).

Feminist discussion of stay-at-home mothers does not tend to acknowledge that welfare mothers are part of the story. This has particularly serious implications today as conservative governments reduce even the limited entitlements mothers previously had to remain on social assistance to raise their children. Over the last ten years in both North America and in Britain there have been increasing efforts to move single mothers off welfare and into the workforce. Women are increasingly defined as worthy citizens only if they meet the same standard as men, by being productive paid workers (Baker and Tippin 1999; Bashevkin 2002; Lewis 2001; Mink 1995; Scott 1999). Previously, women were able to remain on social assistance until their youngest child was 18, or at least until they entered school. Parents of increasingly younger children are now being considered employable, and expected to look for work or accept workfare placements. In Alberta single parents are expected to look for work once their youngest child is six months old. In many provinces single parents are considered employable when their youngest child is two (Beauvais and Jenson 2001, 50-51).

Some feminists and anti-poverty activists have argued that requirements that women with young children look for paid work fails to recognize

child-rearing as work, but such voices have little force in the absence of a coherent feminist argument that supports the right of women of all classes to stay home to raise their children, if they so choose, with the appropriate supports to make this work socially respected and financially valued (Fraser and Gordon 1997, 144-45; Evans 1996; Mink 1995). Most of the extensive feminist welfare state literature has very little to say about mothers who wish to stay at home, or is ambivalent at best about this option. For example, in the introduction to a recent special issue of *Social Politics* on women and the welfare state, Sonya Michel notes that many women "continue to privilege family over work." While she states that two of the contributors have cautioned that such attitudes "cannot be dismissed as mere 'false consciousness'" Michel is quick to note that such attitudes are more common "in instances where high-quality, affordable childcare services are unavailable and/or women's employment opportunities are limited" (Michel 2001, 149). The assumption that all women would choose paid work over full-time mothering if the right conditions existed is clear. These issues are also reflected in Sylvia's Bashevkin's new book, *Welfare Hot Buttons*. Bashevkin paints a grim picture of poor women being forced off welfare and into the workforce by supposedly more progressive "Third Way" governments in the US, Canada and Britain. For Bashevkin, though, the answer is not to support welfare as it is, or support the introduction of "caregivers" allowances for poor single mothers to allow them to do important, but unpaid caregiving work. For Bashevkin the answer is to improve women's position in the workplace, through improved minimum wages, equal pay and dramatically improved childcare options. These are all essential improvements, and would make it possible for many mothers to seek decent jobs. However, these policies do not recognize the fact that at least some women believe it is crucially important that they remain at home to raise their young children.

A few feminist scholars of the welfare state have recognized the real problems that a unitary focus on the workplace have created for poor women. In the American context Gwendolyn Mink notes that middle-class mothers are able to make choices about how to parent, whether to stay home with their children, work part time or full time. Such

choices are not available to poor mothers under post-1996 American welfare reform, where all poor mothers are expected to enter the workforce. They are also increasingly unavailable in Canada (Beauvais and Jenson, 2001; Little 2001; Mink 2002). Linda Gordon notes that the earlier welfare reforms that increased work requirements in American welfare programs "rested on an alliance between those who believe that employment and reliance on wages is on the whole strengthening to women and those who would use employment as a punishment for deviant women" (1990, 28). As Patricia Evans has noted "It is important that feminists are not silent partners in such an alliance" (1996, 164).

Recognizing unpaid child-rearing as work that should receive recognition and compensation from the state is not inconsistent with current feminist demands that the state must dramatically improve women's position in the workforce through the provision of universal daycare, effective training programs that lead to decent long term employment, and other crucial workplace initiatives to provide women with equality in the workplace. Such initiatives would enable the many women currently on social assistance who wish to enter the paid workforce to do so with dignity and security. Demanding support for women's equality in the workforce should not, however, preclude demands that would also improve the situation for women who wish to remain at home to raise their children.

The women's movement cannot leave the needs and concerns of stay-at-home mothers to the right. Feminists should develop an integrated, multi-faceted policy approach that recognizes the complexity and heterogeneity of mothers' needs and desires - both their material needs and the more intangible but no less real needs and desires of many women to be full-time nurturers when their children are young. Acknowledging such needs and desires does not mean that stay-at-home mothering should be the role of all mothers, nor that caring is the responsibility of all women, as some feminists fear (Bains, Evans and Neysmith 1998; Evans 1996). Feminists have come to recognize a range of diversities among women. We need to accept diversity in decisions around mothering as well and develop policies to support such diversity.¹

The report by Christa Freiler et al., *Mothers as Earners, Mothers as Carers*, presents many such

policies in the Canadian context (in the American context see Crittenden 2001, 258-74). The report calls for significantly increased funding for a progressive child allowance, "that would recognize the importance and value of parenting, expand the range of options for mothers/parents to combine earning and caregiving and protect and enhance the living standards of modest- and middle-income families, as well as provide necessary income support for low income families" (2001, 81). Their report also calls for an expanded parental/family leave policy of up to two years that would benefit all parents, not just those who had previously been in the paid workforce. This benefit would be significantly higher than social assistance rates, and would replace social assistance for those with children under two. It would "guarantee an income that is adequate and that signals society's commitment to support mothers/parents to raise their children out of poverty" (2001, 83). The report also recommends the creation of a national childcare system, as well as the retention of existing tax deductions for childcare (84-87). The authors of this report demonstrate that feminists can imagine policies that both enhance women's opportunities in the paid workforce and provide the financial support to enable women or men who wish to do so to stay home or work part time while their children are young. Such policies would assist all parents, but would be of particular benefit for low income single mothers.

There has been considerable feminist concern that state support for stay-home-mothers will create more problems for women than it will solve, by imposing caring responsibilities on all mothers, and permitting the state to define and enforce the parameters of adequate parenting. These fears are not unreasonable, given past state practices (Bains, Evans and Neysmith 1998; Little 1998). However, they do not justify ignoring the very real issues facing stay-at-home mothers, particularly poor mothers. The state is currently less interested in regulating the moral and parenting behaviour of poor single mothers than in getting them off welfare and into the workforce. As well, history provides some models that can minimize the dangers of state regulation. Universal state policies, such as Canada's former family allowances, have historically led to much less state regulation of mothering than have needs tested policies such as mothers' pensions

(Struthers 1994). This suggests the importance of supporting universal policies such as child allowances for all parents (even if they are taxed back at higher incomes) and generous family leaves available to all. Guaranteed annual income is another universal program that would help to compensate women for unpaid mothering work, as well as help to eradicate poverty more generally.

The policies discussed above, particularly child allowances and guaranteed annual income, would allow more women who wished to do so to combine unpaid mothering with part-time paid work. Improved conditions of part-time paid work, including more access to meaningful part-time work, higher minimum wages, better benefits and more inclusion in the federal Employment Insurance (EI) programme are also crucial to this equation. Other policies would also assist stay-at-home mothers. Parenting groups and networks are increasingly popular, as stay-at-home parents seek to counter isolation. Further funding for such programs and more public support for a more community based vision of parenting would also help, as would the provision of part-time daycare for stay-at-home parents. Some socialist feminists have recognized that daycare should not just be a service for employed parents, but can also be of benefit to children and parents at home (Luxton and Maroney 1992; McCuaig 2003). The model of a suburban housewife alone at home with crying children can indeed be oppressive. This privatized vision remains the family ideal of the right. As feminists we need to expand our visions. Full-time daycare, while crucial, is not the only way of working towards a more socialized vision of motherhood. More creative, community-based solutions are needed, so that feminists don't see the only alternatives as being an isolated housewife or an over-stressed mother in the workplace. Younger feminist mothers are developing more creative mothering alternatives. We need to start listening.

The women's movement also needs to recognize the dangers that a focus on seeing women's equality as possible only through the paid workforce has had for low income women. At least more prosperous mothers have some latitude to make their own decisions about how to mother. This is increasingly less possible for low income mothers. Feminists must not be complicit in government efforts to force poor mothers of young children into

the paid workforce. We need to expand our visions, acknowledge the complexity and heterogeneity of mothers' needs and desires and start developing policies and making demands that will improve the lives of all mothers.

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ENDNOTE

1. If we can recognize this diversity, then we would be able to demand policies to support the crucial work that women do, both paid and unpaid. Women will continue to do unpaid work, both from choice and from social pressures, as well as increasingly as a result of governments seeking to download caring work onto women in the home (Bains, Evans and Neysmith 1998; Luxton 1997). If feminists support programs to financially compensate unpaid caring work, we will not only respect the diverse needs and desire of women, but be in a better position to counter government efforts to push women into uncompensated caregiver roles.

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