

Ellen Key: Motherhood for Society

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“Do working moms have quality time for their children?” was the caption above a letter to the editor, published in the *Toronto Star* on December 28, 1981. This concern, among others, was raised by the Swedish feminist Ellen Key, whose major works were published at the beginning of this century. Key was a prominent feminist thinker in her time, judging by references to her work by her contemporaries¹ and the large number of biographies published.² Her books were translated into German and into English. Few references are made to Ellen Key’s work today. The following question immediately presents itself: why is there this loss of interest (at least in the English social scientific literature) for the writings of a woman who was so popular in her time?

Born in 1849, Key was the eldest child in an upper class family. Her father, a landowner of Scottish ancestry, was a member of the Swedish parliament in which he demonstrated radical political leanings. Key’s mother came from an old and noble Swedish family. Ellen was educated at home by German, French and Swedish tutors. Havelock Ellis, who wrote introductions to English editions of her books, states that Ellen Key’s mother was a wise woman with a “fine intuition,” who “overlooked her daughter’s indifference to domestic vocations and left her free to follow her own instincts, at the same time exercising a judicious influence over her development.”³ Ellis’s statement bears a striking

resemblance to Key’s views on the task of mothers in the rearing of their children. It is unclear whether Key’s mother indeed served as a model for motherhood.

Apparently, Ellen Key wrote several novels on peasant life while still in her teens. As a young woman, Key travelled extensively throughout Europe as secretary to her father. It was at this time that she first started to write for journals. Ellis does not specify the types of journals she wrote for, but his statement “a love of art seems to have been a primary inspiration of these early journeys”⁴ indicates that they were in the field of art. Ellis also mentions that Sophie Adlersparre, a Swedish women’s rights advocate, encouraged Ellen Key to write for her journal. In later years Key continued to travel in Europe.

It is conceivable that much of Key’s knowledge of the poor conditions of women’s work outside the home was acquired when she had to find a job at the age of thirty because her father lost his property in an agricultural crisis. She worked as a teacher in a girls’ school for a number of years. Later she taught university courses in literature, history and aesthetics. For twenty years she held the position of Chair of History of Civilization in Sweden at the Popular University of Stockholm. In her writings, Key asserted that the bearing and rearing of children were incompatible with pursuing a professional career outside the home. Yet Key herself was both



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a scholar and the mother of a daughter. She died in 1926, at the age of seventy-six.

Key did not publish any books until she reached middle-age.⁵ Three of her books concern child development: *The Century of the Child* (1900/1909), *The Education of the Child* (1900/1910), and *The Younger Generation* (1912/1915). Her last book was written just after the outbreak of the first world war, and is titled *War, Peace, and the Future* (1914/1916). *Rahel Varnhagen* (1910/1913) is a literary study of the German Jewish author Rahel Varnhagen. Ellis⁶ mentions that Key also published a series of essays on other literary figures such as C.J.L. Almqvist, Anne Charlotte Leffler, Ernst Ahlgren, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning. Finally, there are three books written on women's issues: *Love and Marriage* (1903/1911), *The Woman Movement* (1909/1912) and *The Renaissance of Motherhood* (1911/1914). It is the purpose of this paper to explore Key's ideas on women as embodied in the latter works. The exploration will reveal that while in some ways Key's ideas are progressive, they have limitations for contemporary feminists.

Ellen Key took what she considered to be a crisis in the state of her society and the failure of the "woman movement" (as she called it) to deal with it, as the starting point for her writing. Key called for a radical transformation of society and of sexual ethics to create a future where men and women would share equal rights and work together for the improvement of humanity. In examining Key's ideas, it is first important to understand what Ellen Key meant by "the joylessness of our time."⁷ She saw women's entry into the labour force as one of the contributing factors to this condition. In *Love and Marriage*,⁸ Key mentioned in passing that the methods of production in industrialized society limited women's domestic work, and therefore women were compelled to find employment outside the home, both to be occupied, and to support themselves. Women's forced entry into the paid labour force

was coupled with the disintegration of the home, and this was in turn linked with crime and drunkenness in society. Key does not make the nature of the relationships clear. Presumably, because women were no longer at home to provide emotional and moral support to others, their frustrations were being taken out elsewhere. The following quotation appears to indicate this connection:

When a man came to the woman he loved with his worries, his fatigue, his disappointments, he washed himself clean as in a cool wave, found peace as in a silent forest. Nowadays she meets him with her worries, her disquiet, her fatigues, her disappointments.⁹

Further negative consequences of women's participation in the labour force were noted. Key spoke out against the poor working conditions for domestics and factory workers: long hours, low wages, occupational hazards and sexual harassment.¹⁰ Key correlated the resulting fatigue, tension, ill health and mental disorders with sterility, high infant mortality, inadequate child care, and ultimately with the physical and mental degeneration of surviving children. This was one of the major themes in Key's writings: concern for the decline of the human race. She also expressed a concern common in her day that by competing with men, women lost their "womanly" qualities. Key drew upon Goethe's work for a description of "womanliness," which is found in:

...the finely reserved, quiet, strong self-contained women, reposing harmoniously in the fulness of her own nature, a maternally lovely being, wholly 'natural,' a 'beautiful soul,' observing, creative, but using these gifts only to create a home....¹¹

Here we come upon a third theme in Key's work: concern with the "low" moral standards of her time, which she viewed as the product of the

domination of the masculine value system. In her words, “the uninterrupted fever of competition,” and the emphasis on “the accumulation of riches dry up the soul and rob it of goodness as well as of joy.”¹² Elsewhere she stated that although women’s “metallic being is well adapted to the machinery of society, it is little qualified to make a home for husband and children.”¹³

Key linked the “demoralisation”¹⁴ of society with “amaternalism” which she defined as women’s increasing disinclination for motherhood:

...and has our race ever been afflicted by a more dangerous disease than the one that at present rages among women: the sick yearning to be ‘freed’ from the most essential attribute of their sex?¹⁵

In her view this development was to some extent the result of the women’s movement which stressed individualism over the importance of procreation and the family. Key acknowledged the drudgery of many household chores. She also realized that there were certain groups of working women who did not wish to give up their independence to become housewives or mothers because they felt their jobs were more challenging and intellectually satisfying. Key however argued that the bearing and rearing of children was the “highest moral duty”¹⁶ and the “most perfect human state.”¹⁷ The following quotation provides a summary of her worries:

...what is dangerous and immoral is that the worst element is allowed to multiply without restrictions while the women best fitted for motherhood are unable or unwilling to fill the high office, and finally that those of them who do become mothers are beginning to preach ‘a mother’s sacrificial duty’ not to bring up the children herself but to leave it to the community to train and educate them collectively.¹⁸

The preceding paragraphs provide a framework for understanding Key’s proposals for an alternative society. Concern for what she saw as the demoralized state of her society, and the physical and mental degeneration of the human race, formed the impetus for her writing.

In Key’s view, the women’s movement of her day was too narrow in its approach. She feared that the suffragists regarded the right to vote as an end in itself. She asserted that civil and legal rights were merely a precondition for attaining broader and more fundamental changes. Key called the demand for “a work and a duty,” as advocated by the women’s movement, a “humble utterance.”¹⁹ She felt rather that women should fight to have “the opportunity for that work which one prefers and for which one is best fitted.”²⁰ Key’s program for the future required a change in economic relations from private capitalism to socialism. Within the future socialist society the family would be the basic social unit with men and women sharing equal rights and liberties. Key failed to outline how the changes in social relations were to be effected. These changes were a necessary prerequisite for more fundamental transformations, but they would not be sufficient. Rather, the physical, intellectual and moral conditions of *individuals* needed improvement; here lay the task of women, and specifically of mothers.

Because women’s knowledge and experience had been virtually excluded from expression in the male-dominated society, there was “a crying need of womanliness, especially motherliness in public life.”²¹ Paradoxically, Key did not suggest enlarging women’s participation in public life, rather she urged women to return to the home. According to Key, the women’s movement had made the mistake of equating equal rights between men and women with equal functions. Instead she argued for separate spheres of work. This followed from her opinion that there were distinct psychological differences between men and women and that people should do those

tasks for which they were suited best. Key was careful not to attribute gender differences to genetic inheritance. Rather she stated that differences in interest, attitude, temperament and ability were the product of the division of labour by gender. Because of the domestic labour that women, as child-bearers, had done for centuries, women had developed different skills and dispositions than men. As such, the differences were linked with biological factors. Key did not claim that women could not do tasks typically designated for men; she gave examples of women who were exceptional mathematicians, chemists, medical doctors, etc. Women had cultivated qualities which were essential for motherhood, referred to by Key as "motherliness."²² "Motherliness" was described as helpfulness, compassion, caring, tenderness, sympathy, respect for life and self-sacrifice. Key considered these characteristics to be morally superior.

The observed increasing disinclination for motherhood had made it evident that "motherliness" was *not* an indestructible instinct. Key's work was an attempt to persuade women to play the part in life that was peculiarly their own instead of competing with men for tasks which men might be better able to fulfill. This involved the elevation of the status of motherhood. Contemporary feminists were criticized for considering motherhood a physical function which women had in common with beasts and savages.²³ In contrast, Key advocated the *social* nature of motherhood. She found support for the importance of motherhood in biographies of great men, where the role of mothers and the influence of the atmosphere in the home on personal development were stressed.

Women needed to realize the great social significance of their vocation, which was to exert an uplifting and ennobling influence upon society. "When women are permeated by the hope for a higher humanity, then they will recover the piety, the peace, and the harmony which for the present, and partly owing to feminism have been

lost."²⁴ The task of mothers would be to bring about improvement "through the education of the feelings,"²⁵ thereby elevating moral standards. Mothers through nurturing and caring would awaken their children's love; the love between mothers and children was the root of altruism.²⁶ Justice and truth were to be increased in society by instilling children with a greater reverence for justice and a greater love of truth.

The new order in the ideal future would have the following characteristics.²⁷

1. The aim of all social and political activity would be the promotion and preservation of the new race. Key spoke of making the child the "unconscious head of the family."
2. Parents should be educated for their duty, which would be to provide and create a positive environment for their children. Girls and boys should be taught the principles of Eugenics; they should also receive instruction in sexual hygiene. Furthermore, young women would have to fulfill a year of social service where they would be trained in home economics, child care, child development, hygiene, nutrition, and finally, economics and social studies.
3. Mothers would perform, as free self-realized individuals, the most important task in society; to bear and rear new members of the race. Before and after the period of mothering, women could work at jobs which required their specific feminine talents and which were not too strenuous.
4. Fathers would have time to relax with their children and to enjoy the redeeming qualities of home life. Fathers would also participate in the education of their children.

Key emphasized a *new conception* of motherhood. I have already mentioned the abolition of any political, economic or legal privilege of one sex over the other. In addition, Key proposed state pensions for mothers, thereby realizing the role that economic dependence on men played in women's oppression: "only when society recompenses the vocation of mother, can women find in this a full equivalent for self-supporting labour."²⁸ In one of her early works she argued that if a woman could not find a husband, she should have the right to motherhood outside of marriage.²⁹ Key expressed a great faith in the possibilities and future achievements of modern technology: "then all home arrangements shall be as perfectly adjusted as they are now the reverse, and all home duties be transformed by new ways of work, which shall be lighter, cheaper, quicker."³⁰ There is another aspect to her conception of motherhood. Motherhood should not be perceived as an act of homage or as self-sacrificing. Rather, the "new woman" would have the strength, the "soul", the individuality and the power to give of herself, experiencing "grateful joy" and fulfillment in doing so.³¹

The talent which she has not redeemed by a productive work of her own benefits mankind in a son or a daughter, in whose soul the mother has implanted the social ideas, the dreams, the rebellion, which later become in them social deeds or works of art.³²

Key stressed that people should have the *choice* to opt for a particular profession. Although she advocated "choice" it is quite clear which option she preferred for women: "...a woman's character often develops more in a month during which she is occupied with the care of children, than in years of professional work."³³ One argument she put forward is that nature imposed limits on choice. Nature prescribed motherhood for women by the biological functions with which women were endowed. Nature also made it difficult for people to engage in two "spiritual activities"³⁴ at the same time.

Just as one could not do arithmetic and shake someone's hand simultaneously, so it was difficult to combine motherhood with a job outside the home.

Appraisal

Ellen Key drew attention to important issues, but there are difficulties with the solutions and alternatives she proposed. Key deserves merit for pointing out the significance of women's activities both outside and within the domestic sphere, and for suggesting the re-evaluation and upgrading of women's knowledge and experience. She questioned the dominance of male norms: "for woman's work, studies and other accomplishments, no other standard was applied than that of equality with man's work, man's studies and the accomplishments of man."³⁵ In addition, Key should be commended for her analysis of women's work. I have already noted that she protested the poor conditions for women who were employed outside the home. She spoke of "the worst form of woman slavery"³⁶ referring to women who had paid jobs beside their household tasks. She objected to the stress involved in having a double work load.

Key's writings reveal the awareness of and deep concern for women's domination in marriage. Alexandra Kollontai, the Communist feminist, shared this concern. However, in Kollontai's view³⁷ there was a contradiction in Key's arguments: Key failed to clarify why, if there was to be perfect equality in marriage, the nuclear family, which was a product of the capitalist system, should be the centre of the future socialist society. On the surface, Kollontai stated, Key's concern for motherhood appeared to be an issue that could serve to unite women of all classes. But close examination revealed that Key espoused bourgeois ideals and values. Most probably, Key would deny Kollontai's accusations that she failed to demonstrate the "moral or social necessity"³⁸ of the family unit. Key argued strongly against the socialization of housework and child

rearing, saying that children required *individual* attention.³⁹ This was in accordance, as she saw it, both with the talents of the mother and the best interests of children.

It is the sentimentalization and idealization of motherhood that is objectionable in Key's writing:

...the pain that many modern women experience, the pain resulting from the consciousness that their life, notwithstanding its freedom, is lonely, because it has denied them the privilege of making a home and as a consequence has failed to afford them the joy of creation, which nature intended they should have, and of continuity of life in children to whom they gave birth.⁴⁰

This statement may have been a true reflection of the dominant social values in Key's time, where women's worth was largely dependent on their status as mothers. What is problematic is that Key made motherhood into a *prescription* for all women.

However, Key's emphasis on the social role of motherhood can be placed in a wider context. An article by Ann Taylor Allen, which examined the attitudes toward sexuality in Germany as revealed in the popular humour magazine *Simplicissimus*, provides information on the themes and worries in the period 1888-1914.⁴¹ One of the topics concerned conceptions of femininity. There was the question of whether emancipation had deprived women, and society as a whole, of the gentle feminine virtues. Key had expressed the fear that women were becoming more masculine. Allen also mentioned that in the Scandinavian countries and in Western Europe there was a general decline in birthrate, which started circa 1880, predominantly among the rich and educated. Another aspect was the poor physical condition of members of the lower classes. The ill health of working-class recruits into the British army had become apparent dur-

ing the Boer War (1898-1902). The ruling class had warned that the stock of the imperial race was endangered.⁴²

Key's concern with the betterment of the race brought her into sympathy with the eugenics movement. It is understandable that Key was attracted to this ideology, considering her belief that the reproduction of the species was the highest aim of life. In addition, she had the conviction that although the improvement of social conditions was important, it was not enough. Rather, people needed to be purified from within, thus also at the genetic source. As Rowbotham and Weeks⁴³ pointed out, the danger of all eugenics arguments is that they are filtered through the ruling class; it is they who decide whether the population is too large or too small, which qualities are superior or inferior, and which people have to limit their procreation. A class bias is evident in the following quotation:

...what can be more immoral than to ask the strong and healthy members of society to burden themselves with increasingly heavy taxes in order to support the vicious human offscum, and moreover allow this class to propagate its kind?⁴⁴

Eugenics is also linked with notions of racial superiority. Ellis mentioned in his introduction to *Love and Marriage* that Key's fame was made in Germany. The *Bund für Mutterschutz*, an association in Germany, which advocated the protection of mother and child, adopted many of her ideas.⁴⁵ Key's idealization of motherhood and her ideas about the purification of the human race fitted in with the ideology of the pre-first World War period. Maria Macciocchi's work⁴⁶ on women and fascism is relevant here. She analyzed how fascism in Italy capitalized on characteristics of women that have been developed after centuries of oppression: self-sacrifice, servitude, obedience and respect for authority. Fascist ideology offered women a new type of dignity; women were convinced they were the

primary source of life. Parallels can be found in Key's writing. She spoke, for example, of women's "highest calling," which was to give to humanity its saviours and heroes.⁴⁷

The above considerations give us an indication of why Ellen Key has been largely forgotten. One of Key's major statements is that fighting for legal reform and taking administrative action are not sufficient in themselves. Rather they must be coupled with fundamental transformations in prevailing attitudes and social norms. Most contemporary feminists would agree; they would however find the contents of her proposals for change frightening. First of all, her ideas are linked with notions of race and class superiority. Secondly, there are problems with her adulation of motherhood. We recognize in it the creation of another female myth, another part of the "feminine mystique" to use Betty Friedan's⁴⁸ term. When reading Key's views on motherhood, we do not identify the task she sees for us as embodying the possibility to achieve change by letting our "feminine" virtues penetrate into the public world through our husbands and our children. Rather, we interpret her proposals as a means to prevent us from participating in life on an equal basis. Key may argue that in the future men and women will share equal rights, but as long as that utopian ideal has not been realized, her strategies for change are lacking in appeal for us. Motherhood, as Key envisions it, is a form of repression. As mothers confined to the home, we would be excluded from decision- and policy-making activities.

NOTES

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1. L. Andreas-Salomé, "Essais von Ellen Key," (1899), cited in R. Binion, *Frau Lou* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 249; A. Kollontai, excerpt from "The Social Basis of the Woman Question," (St. Petersburg, 1909), *Selected Writings*, trans. A. Holt (London, Allison and Busby, 1977), pp. 69-71.
2. J. Adelman, *Famous Women* (Lonow, 1926), cited in N.O. Ireland, *Index to Women of the World from Ancient to Modern Times: Biographies and Portraits* (Westwood, Mass.: Faxon, 1970), p. 283; L. Hamilton, *Ellen Key: Ein Lebensbild* (Leipzig, 1904), cited in A.M. Unghérini, *Manuel de Bibliographie et d'Iconographie des Femmes Célèbres*, Supplément II (Naarden, Netherlands: Beckhoven, 1968), p. 502; J. Landquist, *Ellen Key* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1909); J.F.D. Mossel, "Ellen Key," in the series, *Mannen en Vrouwen van Betekenis in onze Dagen*, cited by H. Ellis in the introduction to E. Key, *Love and Marriage* (New York: Putnam, 1911), p. xii; V. Norstrom, *Ellen Key's Tredje Rike: En Studie öfver Radikalismen* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1902); M.M. Schmidt, *400 Outstanding Women of the World* (1909), cited in N.O. Ireland, *op. cit.*, p. 283; M. Stjernstedt, *Ellen Key* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1919); H. Zimmern, "Biographical Account of Ellen Key," *Putnam's Magazine*, January 1909.
3. H. Ellis, in the introduction to E. Key, *Love and Marriage*, trans. A.G. Chater (New York: Putnam, 1911), p. vii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
5. Only those books that were translated into English are cited. The first year of publication refers to the Swedish edition, the second to the English edition.
6. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. xii.
7. E. Key, *The Woman Movement*, trans. M.B. Borthwick (New York: Putnam, 1912), p. 83.
8. Key, *Love and Marriage*, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-170.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
10. Ellen Key does not use the precise term "sexual harassment." She refers for example to "the servant girl corrupted by the master of the house" (*The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 39) and to the efforts required "in rejecting 'erotic' perquisites to add to their income." (*Ibid.*, pp. 81, 82).
11. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 151.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
14. E. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, trans. A.E.B. Fries (New York: Putnam, 1914), p. 65.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
19. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
21. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
23. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
25. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, p. v.
26. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 150 n; Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-166.
28. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
29. Key, *Love and Marriage*, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-192.
30. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
31. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
37. Kollontai, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
39. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-150.
40. Key, *The Woman Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.
41. A.T. Allen, "Sex and Satire in Wilhelmine Germany: 'Simplissimus' Looks at Family Life," *Journal of European Studies*, VII (1977), pp. 19-40.

42. S. Rowbotham and J. Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 173.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
44. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
45. E.S. Riemer and J.C. Fout, *European Women* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p. 171.
46. M.A. Macciocchi, *Les Femmes et la Traversée du Fascisme* (Paris: Union Générale d'Édition, 1975).
47. Key, *The Renaissance of Motherhood*, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-99.
48. B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).