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THE UNREALIZED POWER OF MOTHER

*Dorothy E. Roberts**

In *The Neutered Mother, The Sexual Family and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies*, Martha Fineman dares to assert that motherhood has an "unrealized power."¹ "It is essential," she declares, for feminists to "reclaim the term."² Her admonition could not be more timely. As Fineman powerfully demonstrates throughout the book, contemporary political discourses about single mothers, especially in the contexts of welfare and divorce, increasingly cast women's independent mothering as pathological.³ At the same time, policies that reinforce the norm of the private nuclear family leave women with the burdens of caretaking while denying them both needed public support and privacy from government intrusion.⁴ Fineman's analysis helps to explain the key elements of current welfare reform proposals—the vilification of single mothers as the cause of poverty and social degeneracy; stepped-up government regulation of their intimate lives; and imposition of private measures such as paternal child support and marriage as the solution to children's poverty. *The Neutered Mother* shifts attention from the marital couple to mothers and their children as the family unit that merits social assistance and legal protection, and as the center of feminist inquiry and activism. It is a long-overdue demand for society to value concretely the roles that women undertake and to compensate them for the hard work that they perform.

This essay takes Fineman's notion of motherhood's unrealized power as a starting point. First, I discuss how Fineman uses this concept to challenge both welfare reformers and feminists who devalue the role that mothers serve. Then I explore Fineman's further indication that motherhood holds more positive potential for addressing women's social inequality. I problematize the notion of motherhood's unrealized power by examining some of the complexities inherent in viewing Mother as a transformative metaphor or as a role that unifies women.

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¹ Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family, and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies* 234 (1995).

² *Id.*

³ See *id.* at 101–25.

⁴ See *id.* at 161–66, 177–93.

I. FINEMAN'S CHALLENGE TO WELFARE REFORMERS AND FEMINISTS

The conservative assault on single mothers has escalated since the book's publication. Declaring marriage "the foundation of a successful society" and "an essential social institution which promotes the interests of children and society at large," the House Republicans' Personal Responsibility Act⁵ contains numerous measures designed to penalize unwed mothers and their children. Most onerous is its denial of benefits to teenage mothers for children born out of wedlock, regardless of when aid is sought.⁶ This provision not only attempts to deter out-of-wedlock births, but punishes children by barring them from receiving public assistance because of the status of their birth. The Act also denies benefits to children whose paternity has not been established.⁷

Fineman brilliantly challenges the very foundations of these punitive welfare policies in two critical ways. First, she reveals the patriarchal premises of their assumption of the norm of the sexually-affiliated couple as the center of the family. Fineman situates welfare reform discourse in the context of the historic control of fathers over children, buttressed by a rhetoric that portrays single motherhood as deviant. Second, she demonstrates how these policies obscure the inevitable dependency of children by assigning its management to the traditional private family. Of course, it is mothers—the typical caretakers—who have always paid the price. Returning the missing male to the nuclear family is a way of privatizing dependency and avoiding society's collective obligation to support children.

The Neutered Mother is also a challenge to feminists. As Fineman recognizes, the assertion that motherhood has unrealized power is controversial among feminists. Fineman notes that in the past some feminists, including Simone de Beauvoir, either totally disavowed the gendered role of mother or cast it as a threat to women's sense of individuality.⁸ Liberal legal feminists, Fineman argues, have borrowed some of these themes in their advocacy of policies, such as shared parenting, designed to leave women unencumbered.

Fineman is correct that the feminist project of understanding and addressing women's inequality must incorporate the material and social

⁵ H.R. 4, 104th Cong., 1st Sess. (1994).

⁶ Id. § 405(a)(4).

⁷ Id. §§ 405(a)(7), (9).

⁸ Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 72-74.

implications of mothering. But the feminist task of analyzing motherhood is complicated by a dilemma: it is difficult to explain motherhood, as an institution and an experience, in a way that grasps both its affirming and oppressive aspects. Celebrating mothers sometimes lapses into defining women according to our biological nature.⁹ Condemning the subordinating features of motherhood sometimes turns into the total rejection of motherhood as an "annihilation" of women.¹⁰ Or it may result in the reformist "neutering" of mothers that attempts to achieve a gender-neutral notion of parents. I have struggled in my own writing to express motherhood's "fascinating paradox: although it is devalued, exhausting, confining, and a principal way in which women are shackled to an inferior status, for many women motherhood is life's greatest joy."¹¹

Motherhood is neither a natural source of women's power nor an inherently or entirely oppressive occupation. How then should we describe it? Fineman resolves this tension between glorifying mothers and neutering them with two constructive concepts. First, she avoids an essentialist view of motherhood by proposing the concept of a "gendered life." This concept is based on the premise that women's varied experiences "provide the occasion for women to develop an identifiable perspective that is rooted in their appreciation of, and reaction to, the gendered nature of our social world."¹² It recognizes the gendered implications of women's lives without assuming that all women's experiences and responses are the same. Although Fineman uses this concept primarily in response to concerns about women's differences, I think it also provides a useful way of recognizing that women's diverse experiences as mothers are indeed gendered while rejecting a naturalistic understanding of motherhood.

Second, Fineman avoids the renunciation of a gendered role of mother by distinguishing between the *burdens* that mothers undertake when they care for children and the *oppression* of women. Fineman defines burdens as "the costs associated with what women typically do as caretakers in society."¹³ This enables her to acknowledge that women's domestic labor may provide joy while at the same time entailing material costs and consequences. Demanding that mothers' caretaking be acknowledged and

⁹ See Robin West, *Jurisprudence and Gender*, 55 U. Chi. L. Rev. 1, 28-42 (1988) (comparing cultural and radical feminist views of motherhood).

¹⁰ See Jeffner Allen, *Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women*, in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory* 315, 316 (Joyce Trebilcot ed., 1984) ("I am endangered by motherhood. In evacuation from motherhood, I claim my life, body, world, as an end in itself.").

¹¹ Dorothy E. Roberts, *Motherhood and Crime*, 42 Soc. Text 99, 100 (1995).

¹² See Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 48.

¹³ *Id.* at 162.

compensated need not mean denouncing this work as oppressive. I would argue, however, that women's attachment to and care for their children are related to women's oppression: they are often used by a patriarchal state and fathers as a means of securing mothers' compliance with their demands.¹⁴

II. DEFINING MOTHERHOOD'S UNREALIZED POWER

Fineman very successfully refutes both the stigma attached by policymakers to single mothers, as well as the criticism by some feminists of the focus on motherhood. By calling motherhood an "unrealized power," however, Fineman seems to imply more than a defensive move. Throughout the book there is the suggestion that motherhood is a positive force, perhaps even a liberating occupation, for women. Although Fineman astutely observes that physical dependency is inevitable, "in that it flows from the status and situation of being a child and often accompanies aging, illness, or disability,"¹⁵ she barely questions whether or not it is inevitable that women be caretakers. Fineman does not critique women's role as mother as she does women's role as wife. In her chapter on the sexual family, for example, Fineman notes that most of the girls interviewed for a survey were far less committed than boys to the idea of getting married. More than half of the girls stated that they would consider becoming a single parent. Fineman quotes one sixteen-year old's response: "If I weren't married, I could imagine being a single mother. I know it's hard, but it's worth it. I just know I want children."¹⁶ Fineman emphasizes the gender differences in the teenagers' expectations for marriage, but does not question the girls' assumption that they will become mothers. Moreover, Fineman is firm in her selection of the Mother/Child dyad as the central intimate connection, although she explains that men may fulfill the role of Mother in this metaphorical unit.¹⁷ Indeed, as I noted above¹⁸ (and as the book's title highlights), Fineman is quite critical of feminists who have deleted gender from the role of mother.¹⁹

Fineman's sense of the affirmative "power" that motherhood holds remains somewhat mysterious. Fineman suggests that one aspect of

¹⁴ See Roberts, *supra* note 11, at 110-13 (explaining how patriarchy takes children hostage, both literally and symbolically, to secure women's obedience).

¹⁵ Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 162.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 150.

¹⁷ See *id.* at 234-35.

¹⁸ See *supra* note 10 and accompanying text.

¹⁹ See Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 73-75.

motherhood's power is its metaphorical capacity to redefine the meaning of family in a way that shatters the traditional fixation on sexual affiliation.²⁰ Another possibility might be the power of unifying women around their role as mother. I want to explore the complexities of harnessing this potential power of motherhood.

III. MOTHER AS METAPHOR

Fineman explains that she deliberately chose the device of the Mother/Child metaphor because of its power as a cultural symbol.²¹ She argues that the Mother/Child metaphor has the potential of displacing the hegemony of the sexual-natural family as the basic family unit.²² It is in her defense of the Mother/Child dyad that Fineman comes closest to revealing the "unrealized power" of motherhood. As she elaborates:

The most vivid and shared image of connection is the Mother/Child dyad. This is the prototypical nurturing unit, a fitting substitute for the Husband/Wife dyad that forms the basic unit of the sexual family. . . .

The need for a positive societal vision is the reason the Mother/Child metaphor is appropriate. In excavating the image, I want to pull in the powerful resonances it has across a variety of discourses. . . . Mother is an embodied concept with biological, anthropological, theological, and social implications that give it strength in the public sphere. . . .

. . . . Motherhood has unrealized power—the power to challenge the hold of sexuality on our thinking about intimacy; the power to redefine our concept of the family, which may be why men have tried so long to control its meaning. The Mother/Child metaphor represents a specific practice of social and emotional responsibility.²³

Thus, despite the popular discourses condemning single mothers as deviant and pathological, Fineman concludes that the image of mother and child retains tremendous positive symbolic value. When I try to conjure up this cultural symbol of Mother/Child, however, it is hard for me to divorce it from negative racial imagery. The positive, as well as the negative, aspects of Mother as metaphor are steeped in America's racist history.

²⁰ See *id.* at 234.

²¹ See *id.*

²² See *id.* at 233–34.

²³ *Id.*

American culture has cultivated very powerful images of unfit and dangerous Black mothers.²⁴ These images are particular to Black women and are perpetuated at every level of American popular culture. The ideal Black mother figure, Mammy, selflessly nurtured white children, while under her white mistress's supervision. At the same time, whites portrayed slave women as careless mothers of their own children. Later, the emasculating Black matriarch was held responsible for the disintegration of the Black family. Today, the dominant popular image of Black mothers is the teenage girl who recklessly bears more children in order to collect another welfare check.

The cherished icon of the mother nurturing her child is also imbued with racial imagery. Black mothers' bonds with their children have been marked by brutal disruption, beginning with the slave auction where family members were sold to different masters and continuing in the disproportionate state removal of Black children to foster care. White Americans have long demanded that Black mothers leave their children at home in order to work at menial, low-wage jobs. As I recently noted elsewhere, "Americans expected Black mothers to look like Aunt Jemima, working in somebody else's kitchen. . . . American culture reveres no Black madonna; it upholds no popular image of a Black mother nurturing her child."²⁵

It makes a profound difference that Black children are not valued as much as white children, no matter what kind of family structure produces them. This devaluation of Black-childbearing contrasts sharply with the historic promotion of white motherhood that serves the national good by producing white children. Both policies are patriarchal, but they are just as fundamentally racist. And they produce radically distinct cultural symbols of Mother. The most extreme welfare reform proposals aimed at discouraging women receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) from having children—some even conditioning benefits on Norplant insertion—rely on this racist devaluation of Black motherhood as much as on the patriarchal castigation of maternal independence.

The difficulties that racism poses for employing the symbol of Mother do not negate the importance of investigating the unrealized power in motherhood. I have suggested, for example, that the very experience of Black mothers may aid feminists in developing a complex political

²⁴ See generally Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* 67-90 (1990); Dorothy E. Roberts, *Punishing Drug Addicts Who Have Babies: Women of Color, Equality and The Right of Privacy*, 104 *Harv. L. Rev.* 1419, 1436-44 (1991).

²⁵ Dorothy E. Roberts, *The Value of Black Mothers' Work*, 26 *Conn. L. Rev.* 871, 875 (1994).

interpretation of motherhood that includes the view of mothering as a radical vocation.²⁶ Black women historically have experienced motherhood as an empowering denial of the racist denigration of their humanity. They have often practiced mothering for political ends and in a communal fashion that suggests the potential for collective transformative action by mothers.²⁷ My point is that I do not think there exists a usable cultural symbol of Mother we can excavate. Rather, we must create her from our diverse and common experiences of mothering and from our political vision of what a just institution of motherhood would be.

IV. THE LIMITS OF PATRIARCHY IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHER

Although Fineman acknowledges differences among single mothers based on race and class, her primary interest is in identifying the ideology and rhetoric that links single mothers from diverse backgrounds. Fineman shows how patriarchal ideology that defines single mothers as pathological cuts across race and class boundaries. She observes similarities in the discourses that stigmatize both middle-class divorced mothers and never-married poor mothers. Fineman notes that, "despite these differences, the core and common problem facing mothers within each group is identified as the missing male."²⁸ Fineman calls this phenomenon "cross-over discourses," which she defines as "the propensity for rhetorical images associated with being female in our culture, which are generated and perpetuated in one context, to spill over and define our understanding of women in other contexts."²⁹

In what sense does "'Mother,' as a socially defined and symbolic institution, [have] trans-substantive implications," as Fineman claims?³⁰ True, the concept of Mother defined in the context of poverty discourses shares features with the concept of Mother defined in the context of divorce, both of which, in turn, help to define a broader social understanding of Mother. But this is very different from saying that these mothers are defined or treated in the same way. Motherhood has very different meanings in different contexts of race, class, sexual orientation, and so on. Indeed, it is *in their role as mothers* that women are most differentiated by race, class, and sexual orientation.

²⁶ Roberts, *supra* note 11, at 115-16.

²⁷ *Id.* at 116-17.

²⁸ Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 102.

²⁹ *Id.* at 102-03.

³⁰ *Id.* at 103.

Interrogating more specifically the role that race plays in these patriarchal ideologies helps to clarify Fineman's notion of Mother's trans-substantive quality. Ironically, it is the *distinctive* image of Black mothers in poverty discourses that helps to define all mothers. The condemnation of Black mothers works as a warning to the rest of society—a way of disciplining all deviant women. Black mothers serve as what Patricia Hili Collins calls the "point from which other groups define their normality."³¹ Black single mothers are a powerful cultural symbol not only of all that ails Black people, but also all that ails the family. Castigating Black single mothers sends a message to other defiant mothers who dare to raise their children independently of men. Fineman asks, "Why has this casting of single motherhood as pathological, as a social disease, and as one of the core explanations of poverty, been so readily accepted?"³² Part of the answer is the popular association of single motherhood with Black women. Welfare policy penalizes Black single mothers not only because they depart from the norm of the father-headed family, but also because they represent rebellious Black culture. To some extent, then, welfare policy punishes white single mothers because they act too much like Black women.

Class differences also shape the meaning of motherhood. Although contemporary politicians may condemn single motherhood across the board, they can impose the requirement of marriage on mothers who rely on welfare to survive. Reliance on government assistance subjects poor mothers to a far greater degree of government regulation than that experienced by wealthier women. Poor families are "public" families because they depend on government aid. Courts view their dependency as a waiver of privacy which subjects them to numerous indignities that would be illegal to impose on affluent women. (I am not sure that the private/public family dichotomy applies at all to Black families; they are viewed as always in need of supervision.) Moreover, poor women's reproduction is stigmatized not only when it occurs out of wedlock, but also because it is considered morally irresponsible to have children at the public's expense.³³

In the end, I consider Fineman's work and mine to have a symbiotic relationship. While she sees the ideology of patriarchy as the primary force in the creation and acceptance of these discourses about mothers, I tend to

³¹ Collins, *supra* note 24, at 68.

³² Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 102.

³³ As Fineman shows, part of the reason that childbearing at the public's expense is considered immoral is because the costs of dependency have been allocated to the private nuclear family. *Id.* at 161–66. But affluent single mothers can avoid the stigma associated with dependence on public aid, if not that associated with unwed motherhood.

see the ideology of white supremacy as the primary force in their creation and acceptance. It is probably not helpful to try to determine the predominant influence in the condemnation of single mothers, whether racism or patriarchy. Rather, these observations make it clear that both racist and patriarchal ideology work together to construct the meaning of motherhood. I credit Fineman's analysis with helping me to understand more clearly the relationship between racism and patriarchy in the social construction of motherhood.

V. THE UNIFYING POWER OF MOTHER

The Neutered Mother suggests that the shared interests of mothers offer a common ground for women's political solidarity.³⁴ Some feminists have faulted women's organizations for their silence in the welfare reform debate and have called on women to form alliances based on their common interests as mothers, especially regarding the needs of working mothers.³⁵ During the Progressive Era, a network of activist women exploited maternalist rhetoric to mobilize disenfranchised women and convince American legislatures to implement America's first public assistance programs for single mothers.³⁶ Contemporary women, Lucie White suggests, could replace the progressives' focus on "pensions to protect poor women from the workforce" with "reforms for all parents in the workplace itself."³⁷ Johanna Brenner similarly argues that the time is especially ripe for organizing around working women's needs:

The entry of women into the labor force and the increasing influence of women trade unionists, the impact of feminism on the perception of women's family roles, and the increasing organization of professionals and grass-roots constituencies around family/work issues, make it possible for the first time since the emergence of industrial capitalism to challenge women's assignment to unpaid caring work.³⁸

³⁴ Id. at 52.

³⁵ See, e.g., Johanna Brenner, *Towards a Feminist Perspective on Welfare Reform*, 2 Yale J.L. & Feminism 99, 127-29 (1989); Lucie E. White, *On the "Consensus" to End Welfare: Where Are the Women's Voices?*, 26 Conn. L. Rev. 843, 851, 855 (1994).

³⁶ See Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare 1890-1935*, at 37-108 (1994); Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* 427-28, 439-65 (1992).

³⁷ White, *supra* note 35, at 853.

³⁸ Brenner, *supra* note 35, at 129.

Mothers from all backgrounds share an interest in transforming the gendered division of labor which assigns unpaid caretaking tasks to women without public support and structures the workplace around men's needs.

Fineman's thesis might suggest instead the unifying theme of valuing mothers' work in the home. Fineman argues compellingly that women have shouldered the inevitable costs of dependency and should be compensated for it.³⁹ Her focus on the mother/child dyad appears to be different from some feminists' focus on the workplace. Brenner, for example, argues that "[i]n a period where the vast majority of women with young children work for wages, a welfare policy that pays women to stay home is anachronistic."⁴⁰ Brenner contends that it is women's increasing access to paid work that has freed women from depending on men for economic support, thereby enabling the feminist challenge to traditional gender ideology.⁴¹ She therefore advocates "a strategy centered on providing working mothers with support rather than demanding payments for women to stay home with their children."⁴² In using motherhood's power for political ends, feminists will have to explore further the value of mothers' work in the home and its relationship to women's wage labor.

Despite the unifying experience of motherhood, working mothers are divided by divergent—and even conflicting—interests. Elite and middle-class reformers have tended, because of their social position and education, to see themselves on a moral mission to save their less fortunate sisters. They have a vested interest in explaining poverty in terms of cultural and personal weakness rather than focusing on the structure of economic opportunity and racial privilege.⁴³ The Progressive Era reformers' exclusion of poor single mothers and women of color from their white, privileged network dramatically limited their vision of welfare.⁴⁴ Their fear that welfare was an incentive to "pauperism" and family breakdown limited the generosity of the programs they created. Moreover, a defining aspect of their programs was the social control of poor immigrant families and the total neglect of Black single mothers. The nineteenth-century women lost an important opportunity to form coalitions with Black women activists who at the same time were advocating universal programs,

³⁹ Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 230–33.

⁴⁰ Brenner, *supra* note 35, at 118.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 119.

⁴² *Id.* at 126.

⁴³ See *id.* at 120.

⁴⁴ Gordon, *supra* note 36, at 67–108.

assistance for working mothers, and the linking of welfare to racial justice.⁴⁵

Affluent white mothers have in other ways sacrificed the interests of poor white and Black women in their pursuit of gender equality. For example, many gained entry to the male-dominated workplace by assigning female domestic tasks to Black women, rather than by demanding a fundamental change in the sexual division of labor.⁴⁶ Fineman faults the "egalitarian family" for requiring this "solution" to inherent flaws in the concept of the sexual-natural family.⁴⁷ She notes that "[t]he tasks assigned to this family as the private repository of inevitable dependency necessitates a two-parent family unit with role differentiation and division of labor."⁴⁸ Hence, women in the egalitarian couple family who join the work force either forgo having children or hire someone to care for them.

In this time of mounting state repression against poor single mothers, we urgently need to identify and wield motherhood's unrealized power. *The Neutered Mother* begins this exploration of ways in which Mother can serve both as a transformative metaphor and as a basis for progressive coalition building among women. Unleashing the power of motherhood will require resisting white supremacy and economic injustice as much as abolishing patriarchal family norms. Otherwise, the unrealized power of Mother will just as easily be exploited for repressive ends.

⁴⁵ Id. at 111-43.

⁴⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. Chi. Legal F. 139, 154 n.35.

⁴⁷ See Fineman, *supra* note 1, at 165.

⁴⁸ Id.