

[SEEN, HEARD, VALUED]

MATRICENTRIC FEMINISM



There are currently about 2.2 billion mothers living in the world – and according to Statistics Canada, 9.8 million of these mothers – biological, adoptive, and stepmothers – live in Canada. It is generally accepted that motherhood as a relationship with one’s children and power of reproduction is extremely important and makes a valuable contribution to society, yet for some reason feminists (self-admittedly) have done a poor job representing the interests of mothers. Scholar Leah Williams Veazey suggested that the reason motherhood is noticeably absent from most feminist scholarship is that many feminists feel ambivalent about motherhood. She posited that feminists “do not want to reify or essentialize it” and fear “that a focus on motherhood can be more easily co-opted for a conservative rather than a progressive agenda.” She noted, however, that “the vast majority of women will experience motherhood in their lifetime and it will affect their identity, their financial and material circumstances, their relationships, their social status” and more.

Motherhood is indeed a labour of love and can bring great joy – but make no mistake – it is still LABOUR. It’s also a social construct, an institution, and a practice – not a woman’s sole identity. In “The Myths of Motherhood” psychologist Shari L. Thurer alleged, “On delivering a child, a woman becomes a factotum, a life-support system. Her personal desires either evaporate or metamorphose so that they are identical with those of her infant.” In short, Thurer asserted that as soon as a woman becomes a mother, she “ceases to exist.” (Hardly an ideal Mother’s Day greeting from Hallmark!)

Adrienne Rich, author of the seminal maternal theory text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience & Institution* explained, “Institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal ‘instinct’ rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self.” Author and activist bell hooks argued, “Female parenting is significant and

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UWomen Magazine™
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valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists.” Yet as Rich points out, motherhood is still a “crucial, still relatively unexplored, area for feminist theory.” When you Google the words “kinds of feminism,” a plethora of feminisms appear, including Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Black Feminism, Marxist and Socialist Feminism, Eco Feminism, and more. You might even find something called Maternal Feminism, but this brand of feminism from the late 19th and early 20th centuries embraced traditional domestic roles, conservative morality, and did not in any way threaten existing gender roles.

Clearly, the relationship between mothers and feminists is somewhat “complicated.”

Considering all the above, renowned York University professor and Demeter Press founder Andrea O’Reilly conceived Matricentric Feminism and in 2016 published her field-defining book *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*. O’Reilly’s Matricentric Feminism in no way supports a maternalist agenda and is based on the following governing principles:

- Mothering work is ESSENTIAL
- It should NOT be THE SOLE RESPONSIBILITY OF MOTHERS
- Matricentric Feminism CHALLENGES PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION and EMPOWERS mothers
- It shifts the child ‘centredness’ that defines current scholarship and activism to a MOTHER FOCUS
- It is committed to SOCIAL CHANGE and SOCIAL JUSTICE in order to reposition mothering as a SITE OF POWER.
- It understands mothering and motherhood to be DIVERSE across race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and geographical location

Although O’Reilly believed motherhood “is the unfinished business of feminism,” she did not think Matricentric Feminism should replace feminism. O’Reilly stated the goal of Matricentric Feminism is to emphasize that “the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women’s role and identity as mothers.” Moreover, she stated that motherhood is neither natural nor instinctual. Mother work, like any other type of work, takes intelligence, skill, and practice. In conclusion, mothering is a verb ... which means anyone – fathers, siblings, aunts, uncles, nannies, caregivers, daycare workers – can mother.

So, on Mother’s Day and every day, hats off to all the mothers out there and... Happy Matricentric Feminist Mother’s Day! *(Now that’s a greeting card I’d like to receive!)*



The mother of Matricentric Feminism, Dr. Andrea O’Reilly.