There must be a better way: motherhood and the dilemmas of feminist lifestyle change

In December 1974, Janette appealed to fellow readers of the Sydney Women’s Liberation Newsletter for their advice on alternative lifestyles. A mother of three and anewcomer to feminism, she found living alone with her children ‘depressing’ and was convinced that ‘there must be a better way’ (15). Yet she also questioned the feasibility of alternative lifestyles, especially for mothers. Experimenting was ‘fine for those who have no children, who can try things out and then move on if they don’t work’ but ‘much more complicated for mothers as children “hate change”,’ she explained. Janette exhorted other feminist mothers who ‘have managed to work out a different life style’ to share their experiences (14).

It is not clear if Janette received any responses to her appeal; if she did, they never found their way into the newsletter. Either way, we can be fairly certain that her desire to find a ‘better way’ to raise her children would have resonated with other readers, as would her doubts about her ability to effect change in the domestic sphere. Since the re-emergence of a vocal feminist movement in Australia five years earlier, motherhood had become a major preoccupation of activists both within women’s liberation groups and the reform-oriented Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) as they deliberated over the nature of female oppression.

The ‘troubled’ relationship between feminism and maternity has since become a common trope in histories of the Australian ‘second wave’, the period roughly from 1969 until the early 1980s (Baird; Campo; Everingham; Kaplan; lake; Reiger; Rowland; Sawyer, Making Women Count). These accounts not only identify feminist critiques of motherhood as a source of ‘backlash’ from anti-feminists, but as a faultline within the women’s movement itself. Importantly, they also acknowledge that debates about motherhood created ‘tension and conflict’ for feminists’ own identities as mothers (Rowland 16).

This article adds to these histories by investigating feminist mothers’ efforts to resolve these tensions in their daily lives or, as Janette put it, to ‘work out a different life style’. It traces the development of a distinct set of feminist childrearing practices during the 1970s and early 1980s, premised on new conceptions of intimacy between mothers, their children and other caregivers. In documenting these practices, this article builds on a small body of sociological literature which has investigated feminist motherhood during this period (Gordon; Statham; Wearing; Whittier 148-150). Particularly relevant is Australian sociologist Betsy Wearing’s (1984) study of 150 suburban mothers in Sydney, including a sample of twenty-five feminist mothers drawn from WEL, women’s studies courses, consciousness-raising groups and women’s services (158).

A recurring theme across these studies is the connection between feminist theory and personal politics. For many mothers, childrearing provided an avenue to put feminist ideals into practice. In this respect, motherhood serves as a valuable case study of the dynamics of ‘personal transformation’, one of the distinguishing – but also most contested – features of the second wave, especially its libertarian strand (Lake 228-229, 231). The mid-1970s saw growing interest in the pursuit of ‘new and positive lifestyles’ within the women’s movement (’Editorial’ 4). This development was soon subject to heated debate, with critics warning of the dangers of prioritising ‘personal solutions’ over structural solutions (Stevens 3).

Although this article is not specifically concerned with the wider debate around the benefits and limitations of individual change as a political strategy, it does highlight the particular challenges that motherhood presented for those seeking to develop feminist lifestyles. The pursuit of a feminist approach to childrearing placed significant demands on mothers’ relationships with their children, with men and with other women. As this article will demonstrate, feminist mothers struggled most to realise their new expectations of intimacy with their sons and with childless (or ’childfree’) women.

Tracing feminists’ childrearing practices during this period poses its own problems. Despite an emphasis on the value of personal experience in second-wave literature, feminist mothers themselves have not always been forthcoming about their family lives. The editors of Why Children? (1980), a British collection exploring feminists’ decisions to become mothers (or not), acknowledged that it could be difficult for women to write about this topic, either because they found it too painful themselves or were concerned about hurting others (Dowrick and Grundberg 8).

For this reason, this article utilises a diverse range of sources to construct a more detailed picture of feminist childrearing practices during this period, including personal accounts, archives, newsletters and periodicals, literary and visual representations, and feminist self-help literature. This material is necessarily transnational, reflecting the influence of British and North American feminism in Australia, as well as the fact that feminist motherhood presented similar dilemmas in each context. Drawing on these sources, this article first examines the status of mothers within the Australian women’s movement, before turning to the question of how feminism influenced their decisions about who would care for their children and how they should be raised.

The status of mothers in the Australian women’s movement

When second-wave feminism emerged in Australia and other Western countries in the late 1960s, mothers were among the first to join its ranks. British women’s liberationist and historian Sheila Rowbotham has argued that feminism proved appealing to two main groups of mothers in particular: young, middle-class, educated mothers, who resented their sense of domestic confinement; and single mothers, both middle class and working class, who were reacting against economic hardship and state harassment (‘To Be or Not to Be’ 83).

In Australia, women’s liberation groups first began forming in late 1969 and early 1970, several years after their overseas counterparts (Curthoys, “Doing It Themselves” 230). While these groups, especially those based at university campuses, mostly attracted younger, childless women, mothers were quickly identified as an important target for recruitment. Many of the suburban women’s liberation groups in particular were successful in enlisting large numbers of mothers. The Melbourne consciousness-raising group documented in Talking Up a Storm (1993) was a prime example; all but one of the nine members who had children when they joined the group or gave birth soon thereafter (Henry and Derlet). In addition, the movement attracted numerous experienced activists whose children were now older. Among the most prominent was Melbourne equal pay activist Zeldas D’Aprano, a founding member of the Women’s Action Committee in 1970 (191).

Mothers were even more visible in the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL), established in early 1972 in the lead up to the federal election. In the years immediately following its formation, mothers formed WEL’s core constituency. Three-quarters of its first cohort of members were married and had children (Sawer, Making Women Count) and many of its most prominent spokespersons, such as Beatrice Faust and Wendy McCarthy, were mothers. Indeed, political scientist Marian Sawer argues that women with young children were more likely to feel ‘comfortable’ in WEL than single women (21), although this was to change in later years.

These mothers raised their children in the context of ongoing debate about the role of motherhood in the oppression of women. The early years of second-wave feminism – the period of the emergence of what North American feminist and historian Ann Snitow calls the ‘demon texts’ (34) – were characterised by a ‘harsh self-questioning’ about motherhood (37). Although the latter half of the 1970s saw a ‘maternal turn’ in feminist theory (38-40), the movement’s early literature had a profound and lasting impact on feminists’ perceptions of raising children. It is not possible here to fully explore the nuances of this literature but three key themes are worth noting.
first, feminists challenged the assumption that having children was necessary for women's self-fulfilment. In a major departure from the maternalist feminism advocated by their predecessors, they identified motherhood as a potential obstacle to women's autonomy and sought to highlight the 'non-mothering possibilities of women's subjectivity' (Kevin 5). But the movement's emphasis on the self—what sociologist Imogen Tyler has described as the emergence of feminist 'political narcissism' (174)—the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's worldwide bestseller, Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973), sought to validate women's decisions to remain childless (156), while their later parenting handbook, Our Children (1978), invited current and prospective parents to 'spend time considering themselves' (5). Politically, this translated into a focus on women's right to choose not to become mothers, even in high-profile campaigns around abortion and contraception.

Second, feminists questioned the belief that mothers should be the primary caregivers for children. At the time, popular childrearing guides emphasised the importance of 'bonding' and, in many cases, recommended that mothers be the principal caregivers over their children (Evington 226-227). Feminists contested such advice—often delivered by male 'experts', including 'arch perpetrator' British child psychiatrist John Bowlby (Comer 195)—on the grounds that, because women gave birth to children, they were necessarily responsible for their upbringing (193). Feminists instead argued that children would themselves benefit from being raised by a wider range of caregivers.

Third, feminists characterised the nuclear family in particular as a source of women's oppression. As sociologist Rosemary Pringle has noted, feminist critiques of the family differed from their predecessors' constant efforts to constantly attend to the needs of their young children (Evington 226-227). Feminists objected that such advice—often delivered by male 'experts', including 'arch perpetrator' British child psychiatrist John Bowlby (Comer 195)—on the grounds that, because women gave birth to children, they were necessarily responsible for their upbringing (193). Feminists instead argued that children would themselves benefit from being raised by a wider range of caregivers.

Not all feminist mothers, however, succeeded in brokering such arrangements. Male resistance to assisting women in the home—powerfully satirised in North American Pat Womanspeak—was one of domestic harmony. The poster seemed to promise that sharing childcare would foster not only more equal but more loving

For example, the authors of Parents, based on their understanding of them as an oppressed group (Goodison qtd. in Dowrick and Grundberg 39). Rowbotham has described mothers as 'our equivalent to the Marxist proletariat' (Promise of a Dream 214), a view endorsed by fellow British feminist and mother Lynne Segal (4). In Australia this deference was evident in the organisation of feminist conferences and events. In recognition of the disadvantages faced by mothers, childcare was frequently provided, sometimes at significant expense to organisers and other attendees (Taylor 628).

On the other hand, mothers at times encountered significant personal antagonism. Some complained of being treated in a patronising manner or being excluded from feminist spaces, such as women's centres and households. T. Kristin alleged in the Melbourne Women's Liberation Newsletter that she would 'never forget the humiliation' of taking her two children to the Women's Liberation Centre and being forced to listen to 'two of my sisters sat only inches away... discussing how much they disliked kids' (qtd. in Lake 237). Others described任性的 behaviour by men towards their female partners and their children, including two feminist mothers in Wearing's study, who had felt 'sanctioned' when they decided to continue with unplanned pregnancies rather than seeking abortions (184). Women's decisions to live with the fathers of their children also came under scrutiny, according to those who set up a dedicated Women and Children Discussion Group in Melbourne in 1979 (Taylor 627).

Given this context, it is not surprising that some came to question whether feminism and motherhood were compatible. Many of those who did not have children before joining the movement either remained childfree or delayed having children, returning in an apparent 'babyboom' in the late 1970s and early 1980s among second-wave feminists. There was a 'swelling amount of Feminists having babies' in Sydney in 1979 ('June 9th-10th Conference Report' 3)—also reflecting the changing age demographics of the movement—a phenomenon which was likewise observed overseas during this period (Rowbotham, 'To Be Or Not To Be' 84).

For those who already had children, the dilemmas of motherhood could not be avoided. Wendy McCarthy first grappled with her position as a mother on reading Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch in 1975, distributed by the Women's Movement Children's Literature Cooperative to kindergartens throughout Victoria during International Women's Year. The poster featured twelve scenes of domestic life, including a man changing a dirty nappy, bottle-feeding a baby and preparing a roast dinner. It placed fathers at the centre of the family nuclear, in a manner which was once again observed overseas during this period (Rowbotham, 'To Be Or Not To Be' 84).

Like McCarthy, many feminist mothers resolved to find ways to combine feminism and motherhood. As well as contributing to theoretical and policy debates, one way they did so was to combine feminism and motherhood in their own lives. In doing so, many continuously saw themselves as translating theoretical into practice and developing feminist lifestyles, thereby demonstrating their commitment to the movement. The experience of Melbourne mother 'Agnes' was emblematic: resilient of being judged by other women, she realised that '[n]othing was abstract or hypothetical for us. Everything we decided to believe in ... we were going to have to turn around and use' (qtd. in Henry and Derlet 56). One of the first aspects of childrearing that double mothers' attention was the question of who should be responsible for the care of their children.

Sharing care

Childcare occupied a prominent place in the Australian feminist political agenda of the 1970s. As the aspect of childrearing most closely linked with women's personal autonomy and, in particular, their capacity to participate in work and public life, childcare had special significance. As has been well documented in previous histories of the second wave, the call for 'twenty-four hour childcare' quickly became one of the best-known slogans of women's liberation and a preoccupation of 'femocrats' working within government (Brennan 20-22; Lake 256-257; Sawer, Sisters in Suits 14-16).

At the same time, feminists worked to reorganise the way childcare was cared for within their own homes and the wider feminist community. Reflecting the movement's belief that mothers need not be the primary caregivers for their children, feminists envisioned a range of new arrangements in which care would be shared with other adults. These arrangements depended on men and other women's willingness to take on childcare responsibilities and thus had significant implications for feminist mothers' personal relationships.

The starting point of many of these discussions was the need for a more equal division of childcare between men and women. Many feminist mothers welcomed—indeed demanded—a greater involvement of their husbands and male partners in childcare and other housework. Their new expectations of men were vividly captured in children's book illustrator Rae Dale's poster, Parents (1975), distributed by the Women's Movement Children's Literature Cooperative to kindergartens throughout Victoria during International Women's Year. The poster featured twelve scenes of domestic life, including a man changing a dirty nappy, bottle-feeding a baby and preparing a roast dinner. It placed fathers at the centre of the family household.

Critically, the image presented in Parents was one of domestic harmony. The poster seemed to promise that sharing childcare would foster not only more equal but more loving relationships between men and women. This was also a key message of the new body of feminist self-help literature on parenting that was beginning to emerge in North America. For example, the authors of Ourselves and Our Children reassured readers that shared parenthood 'can expand the love that two partners feel for each other' (141), while Selma Greenberg emphasised the value of cooperation, advising in Right from the Start: A Guide to Non-Sexist Child Raising (1979) that '[i]f he chooses to learn what she chooses to teach, it will be good for all' (74). In this respect, moves towards shared childcare formed part of a wider feminist questioning of intimacy in the context of heterosexual relationships (Gerhard).

Consistent with this vision of feminist domestic life, some mothers enjoyed considerable support from men. Women's liberationist and historian Ann Curthoys, for example, described herself as caring the share of her son with her husband 'equally, rigidly equally' (For and Against Feminism 31). Certainly, feminist mothers appeared to receive more assistance from men than their non-feminist peers. In Wearing's study, all of the feminist mothers indicated that their husbands spent time playing, reading, dressing or minding children, compared to only 8% of the working-class mothers in the Mt Druitt group and 20% of the middle-class mothers in the North Shore group (108-109). Not all feminist mothers, however, succeeded in brokering such arrangements. Male resistance to assisting women in the home—powerfully satirised in North American Pat Womanspeak's widely reproduced article, 'The Politics of Housework' (1970)—remained a source of frustration for many women. Hannah Coral, one of the feminist mothers who participated in Wearing's study, admitted to being 'envious' of friends whose partners were more involved in the home and to having 'fights' about it with her husband (108).

Where men were willing to share in childcare, external barriers could hamper efforts to establish more equitable arrangements. Sydney feminist Kerry Barlow wrote to Womanspeak in 1979 explaining that plans for her husband to take over the care of their infant son had been impeded by his employer, who was 'quite dismayed to hear that a man would want to stay at home with this child' and refused to approve his leave ('Letter 2'). Barlow's experience highlights one of the main limitations of lifestyle change as a political strategy: without broader structural change, the success of such efforts remained contingent on individual circumstances.

Furthermore, a greater emphasis on fathers' participation was not without its dangers. A New Zealand reviewer of Ourselves and Our Children, for example, warned that its focus on men's involvement in parenting risked disempowering women (Kline 70). Too much emphasis on men's involvement was seen as especially problematic for single mothers and lesbian mothers, many of whom continued to face exhausting custody battles (Harrison; 'Lesbian Custody'). As historian Barbara Baird has recently noted, it was only in the early 1980s
That other aspects of motherhood began to occupy 'equal space' with custody and legal issues in the Australian lesbian feminist agenda (852). In this context, feminists could not afford to focus solely on men as a solution to women's childcare needs.

Many placed their hopes instead in the development of alternatives to the nuclear family. Much discussion centred on communal households as the most desirable option for feminist living. While some mothers moved into group households with the fathers of their children, others established women-only households with their lovers, friends or other mothers. Communal living was an especially attractive option for single mothers who, despite the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit in 1975, often struggled financially and were perhaps just as likely to join communal households 'out of sheer necessity' as for ideological reasons (Wearing 162).

Feminist author Helen Garner's much celebrated novels revolved around such households in Melbourne's inner-city and were loosely based on her own experiences of communal living with her daughter. In Monkey Grip (1977), Nora's daughter is looked after by a range of adults as her mother moves back and forth between her own and various lovers' households. A later set of two short stories, Honour and Other People's Children (1980), features the household of Ruth, her children Laurel and Wally, and friend Scotty, who helped her raise them. In both books, the children are raised by their first names, signalling not only a shift towards more egalitarian adult-child relationships but a diffusion of parenting roles among the household members – although, as Laurel candidly reminds Scotty, ‘no matter how much you love me... you can never be my real mother’ (75).

While group households were often associated with inner-city living, or ‘women's lands’ – were also created during this period (lon). Australia's best-known women's land, Amazon Acres, was established in 1974 and received visitors from around the country and overseas. The commune was located in Wauchope, around 400 kilometres north of Sydney, and included a number of child visitors and residents from the time of its inception. Here, too, the practice of shared care was emphasised, with members declaring their ambition to ‘make the bind between a mother and her own child/children less demanding’ ("Amazon Acres" 10).

Just as developing more equitable childcare arrangements with others often proved difficult, women were sometimes disappointed by their experiences of communal living. Feminists were critical of other communal experiments – such as those of the counterculture of the mid-1960s (Donaldson 427) – for failing to significantly alter the division of domestic labour between mothers and other household members. Similar criticisms, however, soon appeared in accounts of feminist households. Wearing observed that although childcare was often shared, biological mothers typically 'still retained primary responsibility' for their children; for example, taking care of children who were sick or who woke in the night (163).

Furthermore, communal living placed pressure on women's relationships with each other. In contrast to feminists' hopes that communal living would foster intimacy between women, Garner's Honour and Other People's Children depicts the deteriorating relationship between Ruth and Scotty, who kilometically looks back on a time when the women had committed that 'everything we theorised was coming true' (80). The short story culminates in Ruth's decision to leave the household, taking her children with her, a decision which marks the final demise of the two women's friendship. The potential tensions between women generated by calls for shared care became even more apparent when mothers looked to the wider feminist community as a source of childcare.

Upon joining the women's movement, some mothers quickly took advantage of their new connections to meet their childcare needs. In a quintessential form of feminist 'self-help', many mothers advertised in feminist newsletters for others interested in reciprocal childdminding arrangements ("Two Little Notes from Gilli" 11a). Others arranged childcare through their consciousness-raising groups or support groups. In Sydney, the demand for reciprocal childdminding within the Lesbian Mothers Group even justified the establishment of a dedicated subgroup in 1980, just one year after the group’s formation ("Lesbian Mothers Group" 6).

For feminists who worked in women's services or enterprises, taking children with them could be an option. When Diana Gribble and Hillary McPhee both had babies within six months of each other, they determined to continue running their publishing house. They set up a nursery on the ground floor of their 'large and seedy' Carlton terrace in Melbourne and employed several 'kindly' babysitters (McPhee 145). Later, the children of their staff were likewise catered for (146), transforming the workplace into an intimate space where the boundaries between public and private life were blurred.

Other feminist initiatives included children's cooperatives in their local areas. These cooperatives met a practical need for childcare but also reflected feminists' opposition to its 'professionalisation' (Brennan 22). A profile of the Glebe Kids Co-op in Sydney's inner-west, published in WomenSpeak in 1977, offers a rare glimpse of how such cooperatives were managed. In order to secure a place for their children and take part in the Cooperative, parents were required to pay a weekly contribution towards the rent, plus fifty cents per half day of childcare. Parents staffed the cooperative, with the assistance of three volunteers ("A Kids Co-op" 8). The author of the profile was especially approving of men's involvement, in particular a young man who chipped away at a nappy, produced a baby bottle and comforted the vanquished (9), a scene reminiscent of Dale's Parents poster. The cooperative developed out of a similar initiative organised by feminists involved in the historic 'green bans' campaign at Victoria Street, Kings Cross.

Although the feminist community could be a valuable source of childcare, some mothers felt that it did not go far enough to meet their needs. They argued that, if the movement was truly committed to practising its politics, all women – not just mothers – would be responsible for caring for the children of its members. Writing in a 1980 special issue of Refractory Girl on feminism and children, one especially vocal critic, Meredith Quinn, accused non-mothers of being unwilling to take on more than a temporary commitment. Childless feminists were often prepared to be involved with children for a short period but then ‘disappear, rarely to be seen again’, she alleged (18).

Such demands were viewed by many childless feminists as unreasonable. One Melbourne activist recalled attending a general meeting at the Women's Liberation Centre where it was argued that all women should be held responsible for the children of mothers who used the centre. She was indignant: 'Although I agreed with social responsibility I was horrified. I thought, if that becomes the accepted attitude I'm out of here' (qtd. in Taylor 145). From her perspective, the expectation that all women assist reflected a distinct lack of respect for her right not to have children, one of the cherished principles of second-wave feminism.

However, debate over the obligations of childless feminists went beyond the question of competing lifestyle choices. The emotional complications associated with looking after other feminists' children were also emphasised. Where Quinn highlighted the difficulties that arose for mothers from other women's tendency to 'disappear', childless feminists, especially those who had lived in communal households, recounted their own stories of painful separations. Numerous contributors to the British collection Why Children? noted the insidious nature of such relationships, North American expatriate Spees P. Dolphin lamented that 'the biological mother still has the power to decide to take the child away' (qtd. in Dowrick and Grundberg 64), while British feminist Lucy Goodison conceded that she had decided that she would have to give birth herself in order to have 'a continuing and close relationship with a child' (21). Rather than undermining biological ties, as many feminists hoped, the experience of caring for other women's children had the opposite effect.

Conflict over the role of the wider feminist community in providing childcare was indicative of the difficulties that motherhood presented for those pursuing feminist lifestyles. The power of organisation, recalling their 'childhood training' at length in movement literature and consciousness-raising groups (Strive 267). While feminists could not undo their own upbringings, many were determined to ensure that their children's lives were not similarly constrained. They hoped to raise their children to be ‘different kinds of men and women’ (Pringle 100).

In keeping with this aspiration, feminist self-help literature encouraged mothers to ensure that their children were raised in a 'non-sexist' home environment. North American feminist and Ms. magazine editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin was one of the earliest and most prominent contributors to this new genre. Her classic article on childhood sex-role socialisation, in which she advised feminist mothers to provide a 'strong dose of non-sexist upbringing', appeared in the very first edition of the magazine in December 1971 ("Down With Sextism Uprising" 114). Over the course of the decade, feminist mothers could regularly read her book and toy reviews in Ms. and she later went on to publish the 600-plus-page guidebook, Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80's (1980).

Pogrebin's publications set out a new basis for intimacy between women and their children. Rather than serving as the 'instruments' of children's oppression – which Summers and others had argued was the traditional role of mothers – Pogrebin implied that they had the capacity to 'liberate' their children from sexist stereotypes. Although this responsibility might be shared with other caregivers, mothers were her likely readers and Pogrebin herself acknowledged that her first article on the subject was allocated to her 'by default'; she...
Critical, this new mode of intimacy extended to both mothers of girls and mothers of boys. Indeed, although feminist mothers might relate more readily to their daughters' experiences of sex-role socialisation, Pogrebin insisted that it was also important that they direct their attention to their sons' upbringing, as both genders were 'victimized' by sex-stereotypes (114). This emphasis on boys as victims contrasted sharply with other feminist characterisations of boys as exercising 'male privilege', discussed further below.

Feminist mothers in Australia found that there was wide scope for intervening in their sons and daughters' lives. Children's books, toys, television and clothing received particularly concerted attention. These four areas were seen as some of the most powerful means of conveying ideas about sex roles to children, particularly in their early years; they set up the patterns of reinforcement (Statham 97). They were also aspects of children's lives over which feminist mothers could exert some control, albeit not always as much as they might have liked.

Children's books were one of the most successful target areas of feminist mothers. To begin with, they could follow the 'age old' trick of reversing the pronouns 'his' and 'her' (Pausacker 80). Soon they were able to purchase feminist alternatives, initially sourced from overseas and, from 1974, from the Women's Movement Children's Literature Cooperative in Melbourne. Also known as the Sugar and Snails Press, the cooperative was one of the early success stories of feminist publishing in Australia (Webby 397), with over fifteen books published in its first four years alone. These publications were themselves illustrative of a new set of feminist ideas about childrearing. As well as modelling alternative family arrangements – as in Dale's Parents poster – they also featured parents who allowed their children to pursue interests that contravened conventional sex-role stereotypes.

Feminist efforts to modify toys and games are harder to trace. Whereas books and toys were relatively cheap to produce, television required significant financial resources. Short of censoring children's television viewing, the options available to feminist mothers were limited. In Sydney, the Hurstville women's liberation group undertook a survey of children's books and television to raise awareness of the extent of 'social conditioning' ("Group Reports") 4). At home, some may have followed Pogrebin's advice to provide 'parental supervision and sermonizing' (117), encouraging a critical awareness of sexism.

Children's clothing was more open to mothers' direct intervention. Feminist mothers' preference for a more gender-neutral and practical style of dress was evident in Robyn Lilith's What Children Do (1975), a short photographic book featuring images of three girls and boys in almost identical clothing and hairstyles. Providing children themselves with a choice of clothing was also considered important. At the Neighbourhood Children's Centre in Canberra, run by a group of parents and teachers including feminist mother Noel Ridgeway, there were 'wide choices' for dressing up and 'boys happily wear skirts, hats or handbags' (18).

Although some areas were more conducive to change than others, feminist mothers found there were ample opportunities to counter sex-role stereotypes within the intimate domestic space. Initiating children into the wider feminist community would prove more challenging. Even as they asserted the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender', second-wave feminists continued to rely on the categories 'male' and 'female' to further their political demands. The feminist community – and many feminist spaces in particular, such as women's centres – was constituted along gender lines. Initiating children into these spaces proved to be much easier for mothers of daughters.

Mothers approached their daughters' upbringing as a natural extension of their feminist activism. Some linked their participation in the feminist movement to their desire to improve their daughters' futures or, in the case of Melbourne feminist 'Bernadette', the need to be 'good' mothers if they ever had female children (qtd. in Henry and Derlet 48). Others went so far as to express a distinct preference for having daughters (Henry and Derlet 131; Gordon 86).

Raising girls was an especially appealing prospect for those who proclaimed the value of a 'woman-identified' or 'woman-centred' existence, informed by what the US Radicalesbians described in their 1970 manifesto as the primacy of women relating to women. Like lesbian relationships or living in women-only households, raising daughters could be viewed as a way of enacting this principle. Moreover, raising girls opened up new opportunities for a 'woman-identified' existence. Mothers developed new feminist rituals to share with their daughters; for example, marking her daughter's first period with a night out or celebratory dinner (Taylor 508) or passing on classics such as Our Bodies, Ourselves (Henry and Derlet 82).

Daughters could also be directly initiated into feminist activism, accompanying their mothers to International Women's Day and other marches and attending meetings. Fiona, the daughter of Pat Giles – a WEL activist and later Australian Labor Party Senator for Western Australia – had already read The Female Eunuch by the time she was fourteen in 1972; the same year Fiona attended the first Women's Liberation Meeting in Perth and led a 'triumphant campaign' against the dress code at her school (qtd. in Scott 168).

Daughters could even be recruited to assist at women's services. Melbourne women's refugee worker Jean Taylor enlisted her teenage daughter Kristi to babysit the residents' children so that the mothers and staff could have a night out in December 1978. By contrast, her son could not have been entrusted with such a task and was not even permitted to know where the refuge was located (579), a telling example of how feminist spaces expanded the opportunities for intimacy between mothers and daughters, in ways that were not possible for sons.

Unsurprisingly, feminist mothers brought high expectations to their relationships with their daughters. However, feminism was not in itself a guarantee of greater intimacy. Time spent on feminist and other political activism could also interrupt feminists' relationships with their daughters. Pat Giles' biographers observed that her daughters 'seem often to have felt sidelined' (Hopkins and Roary 174), while Taylor received a 'painful and salient reminder that by prioritising my political commitments. I could lose her' when her daughter took an overdose of painkillers in 1979 (609). Such conflicts were not unique to feminism but they took on particular significance because of mothers' sense of being caught between their obligations to their own daughters and to other women.

The conflicts to intimacy between women and children posed by feminism were arguably much greater when it came to raising boys. Whereas daughters could be directly initiated into feminism, the implications for their sons were much more ambiguous. Following her own experiences of raising a son and observing others, Australian feminist and historian Babette Smith went so far as to argue that feminism had 'failed the mothers of sons' (ix). She attributed this failure in large part to women's unwillingness to relinquish the 'pleasures of having a son' or view themselves as 'mothering "the enemy"' (155).

Smith's (1995) study of mother-son relationships was primarily concerned with the wider impact of the women's movement and included only a few self-identified feminists. Nonetheless, it speaks to a central dilemma in feminist mothers' relationships with their sons. While boys might be victims of sex-stereotypes, they were also understood to enjoy the benefits of 'male privilege'. As such, feminists raising boys were forced to closely examine their feelings towards their sons and the sense of 'social approval' associated with having a male child (McCarty 97). Furthermore, while raising sons could enable feminists to see the 'beauty and possibility of good' in men (6), North American feminist Judith Faro warned in Every Mother's Son (1983) that eventually 'their education as men in this misogynist society will pull them from our arms' (3). WEL activist Beatrice Faust offered one such example in a letter to Refractory Girl, recounting that her efforts to raise her son to be non-sexist had been successful until he became 'hardened' by school ("Letters" 31).

The scrutiny of other feminists further complicated the situation of those raising boys. In an interview with Scarlet Woman, one mother described how her son was closely watched by other members of her lesbian feminist household: 'He'd play with a hammer and it'd be seen as sex role conditioning. Everything was picked up' (As Feminists, as Lesbians, as Mothers 1980). Although boys were exposed to less overt hostility from other feminists. Although it is difficult to gauge just how widespread such sentiments were, hostility towards male children was sufficient to prompt objections from mothers and their sympathisers on a number of occasions. An early example appeared in the April 1974 edition of the Sydney Women's Liberation Newsletter. The author of a short piece titled 'Is this Our Religion?' listed a set of ten feminist commandments, the third of which warned: Thou shalt not bear male children' (17). The article was a pointed critique of the dangers of a dogmatic feminism – indeed a 'religion' – that expected all women to adhere to a particular kind of lifestyle.

Far from diminishing over time, hostility towards boys seemed to have increased at the end of the decade. In 1980, Curthoys, who was raising her young son at the time, expressed concerns that feminists were becoming increasingly 'anti-male in a crude sense' (qtd. in Roland 59). The following year, North American feminist theologian Mary Daly’s visit to Sydney precipitated a split in the movement over her anti-male stance (Genovese), while boys emerged again as a ‘faultline’ at the first national conference on lesbian motherhood in 1984 (Baird 853).

Debates over boys were particularly difficult to resolve when it came to the question of women-only events and spaces. While the exclusion of adult males on such occasions was widely accepted, views differed on whether it was appropriate to place similar restrictions on male children. It was not unusual for feminist events and spaces to be closed to boys over a certain age — often eight years old, as was the case at the annual camp held at Monarto, near Adelaide, in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Women's Summer Holiday Camp Collective) – although it was less typical for them to be excluded altogether.
feminist mothers responded differently to such restrictions. Some mothers resisted the exclusion of boys, arguing that it set up a conflict between women’s identities as mothers and feminists. Although ‘Helen’ was not sure whether there was a rule forbidding boys from the Women’s Liberation Centre in Melbourne, she recalled being ‘a bit worried about bringing a male child in there’, a feeling that contributed to her sense that the space was not welcoming of mothers (qtd. in Henry and Derlet 55). At Amazon Acres, some mothers shared this discomfort. Conflict over boys and men’s access ultimately lead to a split among residents in the early 1980s. Those opposed to any male presence eventually moved to another women’s land nearby, the Valley, purchased in 1980 (Iton 104). The Valley, too, later became divided on this issue, leading to the establishment of Herland, purchased in 1982 and specifically designated as a farm for women and girls only (107).

However, there were also other mothers who not only complied with these restrictions but strongly endorsed them. Taylor, for example, felt strongly that ‘mothers had a duty to teach their sons respect for all women only environments’ (628). She particularly admired fellow Melbourne women’s liberationist Boni Hill, who allegedly lived in a separatist household in Berry Street ‘where not even her three [adult] sons were allowed over the threshold’ (270). For at least some mothers, the exclusion of boys was an accepted feminist practice.

The fact that feminist mothers themselves were divided over the practice of excluding boys from women’s spaces was indicative of the conflicting emotions associated with raising sons during the 1970s and early 1980s. The pursuit of non-sexist childrearing assumed that boys, like girls, were victims of sex-role stereotypes. Yet, feminist mothers also confronted uncomfortable questions about their son’s access to male privilege, placing pressure on their relationships with other women in the feminist community. The question of whether childrearing was compatible with a feminist lifestyle proved all the more difficult to resolve when it came to raising boys.

**The legacy of feminist childrearing**

Contemporary feminist mothers seeking advice on a ‘better way’ to raise their children do not have to go far to find an expanding body of scholarly and popular literature on the subject. Within the field of maternal studies, they will find a stream of works on ‘feminist’, ‘outlaw’, ‘radical’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘hip’ motherhood (O’Reilly 20). Online, they may turn to the feminist blogosphere, where the success of the Australian site, Blue Milk, is indicative of wider interest in feminist mothering.

Far from representing a new development in feminism, this contemporary literature owes much to the efforts of mothers who were active in the women’s movement during the 1970s and early 1980s. This article has demonstrated that, as mothers sought to forge new, feminist lifestyles, a distinct set of feminist childrearing practices emerged out of the second wave. These practices varied from negotiating new childrearing regimes to practicing ‘non-sexist’ parenting, but reflected a common desire to translate feminist theory into their daily lives.

These childrearing practices had mixed implications for mothers’ relationships. On the one hand, they promised to open up greater opportunities for intimacy between mothers, their children and other caregivers. Feminists imagined that sharing the care of children would create more equal and loving relationships between men and women, as well as a new basis for solidarity between mothers and non-mothers. Just as importantly, they hoped that by ‘liberating’ their children from sex-role stereotypes, their role as mothers would be a less oppressive one.

On the other hand, mothers’ efforts to translate feminist theory into their daily lives placed significant pressure on these very relationships, especially with sons and with childless women. Even those relationships which seemed most readily compatible with a feminist lifestyle – most notably relationships between mothers and daughters – were at times fraught.

These ruptures could not be ignored but nor did they necessarily deter women from pursuing lifestyle change. Indeed, mothers’ decisions to persevere, in spite of these pressures, underline the high value placed on personal transformation by feminists and their abiding optimism in people’s capacity to change. Although motherhood tested the limits of lifestyle change, many continued to see it as a valid and worthwhile pursuit. The ‘risk’ to relationships, as one interviewee in *Ourselves and Our Children* explained, was worth it in order to find out ‘what is possible’ (140).

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