

‘Care’ from private concern to public value: A personal and theoretical exploration of motherhood, feminism, and neoliberalism

JULIA E. TIMMINS

Abstract

In this article, Julia Timmins use an autobiographical lens to explore her journey in feminism, both theoretically and in practice. Specifically, she discusses how her own experiences have informed her learning about feminism and care. She first considers how her time as a ‘mother at home’ in the 1970s and 1980s shaped her relationship with second-wave feminism. Focusing attention on the activities and groups she was involved with during those years, she explains how they functioned as spaces which fostered solidarity between women, as well as sites of resistance against the growth of neo-liberalism within Aotearoa/New Zealand politics. Drawing upon the theory of care ethics, Timmins discusses her response to this political climate, particularly her activism against child poverty.

Key words

Motherhood, second-wave feminism, ethics of care, La Leche League, Playcentre, neoliberalism, poverty

In this article, I use an autobiographical lens to consider my journey in feminism, both in theory and in practice. Intelligence and emotion are, as Carol Gilligan reminds us, intimately connected: ‘Knowing and caring are integral to political resistance, and specifically to resisting the gendered strictures of patriarchy that render intelligence (knowing) from emotion (caring) and render both men and women less than fully human’ (2018, p. 41). Thus, I want to show that my own experiences and feelings have threaded themselves through what I have learned about feminism and care.

In the first part of this article I examine how, as a mother ‘at home’, particularly during the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, I felt excluded from the second wave of feminism.¹ By describing the activities and groups I was involved with during those years – La Leche League and Playcentre – I argue that if these were not parallel movements to second-wave feminism, they were at the very least a show of solidarity with other women and sites of resistance against the developing surge of this period’s neoliberal project. At the centre of these spaces was an emphasis on the ‘care’ of our children, our families, and our fellow members. Finally, I write about my move into the public space and the way in which ‘care’ was equally at the centre of that work. In particular, I focus on Aotearoa/New Zealand’s neoliberal policies of the late 1980s and 1990s, which contributed to a spike in child poverty. I interweave a brief study of an ethic of care throughout this autobiographical piece.

I must emphasise that this is my story and my story only. It is set in a certain time, but I do not pretend that I can represent either the other members of my family, or other mothers. As Adrienne Rich wrote when thinking about her own mother, ‘It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed’ (1976, p. 221). This is likewise very

true for me in any retelling of my story where others are mentioned: their own story would reveal different landscapes. I can only describe mine, and even then, only as I recall it now with biases and all.

What do you do?

How I resisted answering that question, so often asked at social gatherings! I became adept at different answers: 'I don't do, I be', or 'Do with what?' Underneath that attempt at deflection lay an anxiety. An anxiety brought on by the knowledge that, although I truly thought I was doing something important – creating a home and raising a family – I increasingly felt that in the feminist world and wider society this was seen as 'not enough'. The growing women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s was, quite rightly, demanding a more equal role for women in society. Second-wave feminists had a strong focus on women moving into 'paid work'. I too wanted to be known as a 'women's libber' (later a feminist) – I believed deeply in equality between the sexes. But it seemed as though my decision to concentrate on my role as a mother excluded me from participation in this movement. This is my reflection on that paradox.

Early years and education

I was born into a loving and secure family with European (mainly Irish) heritage. And along with that heritage came resultant privileges. I am aware that privilege made my life different and easier than other lives of that era. On both sides of my family, my parents were a mix of first and second-generation New Zealanders. Their parents and grandparents had moved here to better themselves and to escape the poverty that was the lot of many working-class families in Ireland and Scotland. In particular, their Irish background included a memory of the famine that had nearly wiped out their homeland. My own parents experienced the great depression of 1929 and the rationing of World War II. This resulted in a 'waste not, want not' attitude, and a care for others who were 'less well off' than we were.

As I have been reflecting on my life here, my own mother has been very much on my mind. All those conversations I wish I'd had with her! How hard it must have been for her, recently married after World War II, to leave an interesting job and a rich music-filled life in Auckland and move to a small town in the Wairarapa, living with her new husband's farming family, where the women cleaned and cooked all day and music was scarce. This was a very different landscape from what she had left behind.

Very soon, my parents had their own home, and children started to arrive, five in all. My mother took very seriously her roles of mothering and providing a safe and nurturing home for all of us. These were the post-war years and there was a desire for stability. Women who had worked during the war were now expected to create a place of domestic bliss for men to return to (Middleton, 1988, p. 74). I have special memories of feeling safe, feeling loved, and loving the sound of Mum playing the piano. She had an important role in Dad's small business, doing the accounts. Dad took equally seriously his role of being a provider, and there was no doubt that he was in charge. Our family was very reverential to any authority, be it our parents, the local priests and nuns, and any institutions of government. We were simply not allowed to question this hierarchy of power.

A huge influence in our home was the Catholic Church. This was an influence shaped by the Irish church and very much founded on fear, with God regarded as a punitive figure in the sky. The two primary schools I attended were both Catholic, and the teachers were Irish nuns

who passed on their own internalised beliefs and fears. The practicalities of being Catholic organised much of our week, with fish every Friday (that was nice) and church on Sundays as well as any other days where our presence was required. The church also provided a social setting in which families mixed together and provided support for each other. We understood that our duty was first to God and then to one another and the wider community. In particular, we were to show mercy, compassion, and justice to those who were not as well off as we were. While this was a patronising attempt at improving people's lives – especially people living in other countries – it did instil in me a sense of the importance of social justice.

There were early inklings of my feminist knowing. I had this niggling feeling that 'things were not quite right' about how girls and boys were treated. And it was possibly this sense of injustice that led me, when I was around eight or nine, to persuade two of my friends to accompany me to the presbytery and ask the priest, 'Could we have a girls' rugby team please?' My first feminist action. Needless to say, that request was met with laughter and a definite 'no', plus a telephone call to my parents. In fairness, though, a year later, the nuns allowed me to join the boys' cricket team, and this time when we arrived to play at the local state school, it was *their* male teacher who turned to me and asked, 'What can I do for you?'. 'I'm in the team', I proudly answered, much to his surprise.

I could see that boys and girls were being treated differently – expectations were different and I had the beliefs of the Catholic Church being hammered into me on a daily basis, particularly in the religious instruction classes that began our day. Along with a general feeling of being under constant surveillance from this 'God' character, we girls were left in no doubt that, while boys were made in God's image, girls were sites of sin – especially with regard to our conduct.

I then had four years of secondary education at a small Catholic school, which was run by an order of Irish nuns. For my final year of schooling in 1969, I went to board for a year at a much larger school in Wellington. I will be forever grateful to the nuns who taught me there, as they were in no doubt that all of us in 'upper six', as it was called, should go on to university. This thought had not occurred to me before. While I had a grandmother and great-grandmother who had both been teachers, I was the first in my generation of the family to attend university.

At that time there was also a gendered contradiction in education circles more widely, as described by Sue Middleton:

Although education for postwar reconstruction was premised on the liberal-democratic values of equality of educational opportunity for all, limited only on the grounds of 'ability', it also rested on the assumption that the stability, order and moral cohesion of society depended on women's unpaid labour as homemakers. (1988, p. 72)

University thrilled and scared me! I was amazed, and sometimes shocked, at what was being said in the new public spaces in which I was moving. At university I had more freedom than ever before in my life, but I didn't know what to do with it. I was well aware of feminist meetings, or 'women's liberation groups' as they were more likely called, but my still unquestioning belief in the church and its teachings prevented me from participating.²

I was majoring in Political Science and I remember the impact of learning about Marxist theory well. It seemed to make sense. I have no memory of any discussion of gender issues in my courses, or indeed of any female lecturers teaching Political Science throughout the three years of my degree. In my second year, I did a course in marketing, as I had always been very interested in my father's business. However, I remember feeling decidedly disillusioned as the realities of advertising and marketing were revealed. To me, it felt like straight-out exploitation. One of our assignments made me feel extremely uncomfortable – it was to design a marketing

plan for selling a 'feminine deodorant'. Our class had only four women amongst the 50 or so students. I lacked any understanding of gender politics or critical thinking and so, like a good student, I meekly went about doing the assignment, as did all the other students.

This same lack of critical thinking, this time due to my religiously inspired belief system, found me marching down the streets in central Wellington carrying an anti-abortion banner. While I now hold the view that you cannot be a feminist and take an anti-abortion stance, I am compassionate towards my younger self because of the very strict belief system in which I had been born and raised.

The 1970s

Fresh out of university in 1973 with a BA in Political Science, I walked straight into a very good job in the Ministry of Education. There, I came across several women who identified as feminists. It was a time when equal pay was still relatively new (my sister had recently had the indignity of working in the bank next to a younger man who was being paid more for doing the same job), and women were expected to resign from their position in public service if they married men who were likewise employed in this field. The lunch room was abuzz with talk of equality for women, and I was a sponge soaking up the views of these women, but not yet ready to abandon my religious beliefs to liberate myself. It was an exciting time of change, as historian Raewyn Dalziel writes when describing twentieth-century progress for women in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

[I]t was not until the 1970s that women's politics became the politics of fundamental social change. During the phase of political organisation commonly known as the second wave, women laid claim not only to equality of status and treatment, but also to equality of opportunity and results. They challenged the way society ordered relations between men and women and separated private and public spheres. (Dalziel, 2018)

In 1975 women's movements all over the world were gearing up for the first United Nations World Conference on Women, which took place in Mexico City. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, a second United Women's convention was held in Wellington in June of that year. However, I had other matters on my mind, as I was preparing to marry and leave Aotearoa/New Zealand. At university, I had met a student called John who shared my Catholic upbringing (but questioned everything!). John had won a fellowship to study in Nova Scotia, and he asked me to marry him and accompany him on that journey. I said yes. That is what I thought you had to do – if you wanted to be together, you had to marry.

Motherhood arrives

My Catholic beliefs intervened very early in our marriage, and in just over nine months our first child arrived. My journey of 'love's labour' (Kittay, 1999) had begun. John and I then moved to Washington DC, and it was there that I first experienced the value of women supporting other women. Without any family to help us, and being new in the city with a very young baby, I reached out to the La Leche League (LLL) – an organisation that supported women with breastfeeding – for help in these early months. The women in this group became my friends and local support. I didn't think too much about returning to 'paid work' in those years; for a start, I was unable to work in the United States, and with John teaching at a law school, there was no financial compulsion for me to do so. I was simply doing what I had seen my mother do, and doing what I enjoyed, being with and caring for my child and creating a nurturing home for all of us. I kept hearing stories about women who were creating waves; names such

as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan were frequently in the news and I was quietly interested.

When we returned to Wellington after three years abroad, I was confronted constantly by friends and former work colleagues with the question, ‘when are you returning to work?’. While the question flattered me – I saw it as a reflection of the rather rapid rise I’d had in my short public service career – it came with a pressure I didn’t enjoy. It seemed that I couldn’t both be part of the women’s liberation movement and, at the same time, admit that I wanted to continue to be a mother ‘at home’.

Playcentre

In 1979, after moving to Auckland and with our child now a pre-schooler, I joined the Eden-Epsom Playcentre. Playcentre is a homegrown pre-school movement. It began in the early 1940s with the aim of supporting women with young children, many of whom were on their own during and after the war years. From the beginning, the philosophy of Playcentre was acknowledging parents as first teachers and the importance of child-centred play/education. It was also very much a place where women were organising. According to Helen May, who has written widely on the history of pre-school in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

[T]he history of early childhood education ‘is mainly a history of women’s activism, taking place in the experimental and the voluntary/charity sectors. Early childhood services have often been small scale and out of sight, in homes, houses and halls.’ (Cited in Duhn, 2009, p. 31)

This activism was certainly out of sight to the historian James Belich. In his interesting but somewhat broad-brushstroke approach to feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand, he writes that ‘the period 1910s-50s has been seen as something of a dark age for New Zealand feminism, and attempts to contest this image have not as yet been very convincing’ (Belich, 2001, p. 496). Whom did he ask about this, I wonder? His comment speaks volumes to me about not only the invisible nature of women’s unpaid work, but also the invisibility of the activism within this space.

At Eden-Epsom Playcentre, I found a group of highly educated women, all of whom shared my belief in the importance of the mother/child relationship. And, of course, we were living in a time when for many of us, it was much easier to make decisions around paid work and mothering. I am well aware that other women were making different decisions, whether out of choice or not. Within our own group there were women who were doing relief teaching and others who were involved in family businesses. We had doctors, lawyers, architects, and engineers in our midst, along with many teachers and nurses. Conversation was always interesting and often thought-provoking. And while it was our children who brought us together, it was the support of these women and the joy of being in a co-operative organisation that led me to stay involved in the Playcentre through four children and 14 years. Many of the women whom I met in my first weeks at Playcentre are still my close friends and part of my support group today. With both LLL and Playcentre, I was getting as near to ‘alloparenting’ (Blaffer Hrdy, 2009, p. 22) as was possible in the construct of our society. According to Blaffer Hrdy, ‘An alloparent (from the Greek “allo-” for “other than”) refers to any group member *other than* the parents who helps them rear their young’ (2009, p. 22). I believe that alloparenting is essential for the welfare of mother and baby.

Motherhood – off the agenda

The solidarity among all the women I encountered at LLL and Playgroup was much needed at a time when those of us who were ‘at home’ with children were increasingly under examination.

Julie Stephens, an Australian social theorist who specialises in research around the changing meanings of the maternal, wrote:

Familiar, public renderings of feminism's history often depict the women's movement as an inexorable march toward modernity. If women were to become modern, emancipated subjects, certain things would have to be left behind. The so-called ancient maternal ties were seen to be the first to go. (2010, p. 94)

Another Australian and social philosopher, Anne Manne, is more succinct: 'To mention the word motherhood at a feminist conference was enough for the atmosphere to crackle with existential panic' (2005, p. 35).

Motherhood, it seemed, was off the agenda in any respectable feminist gathering. But from where I stood, it was puzzling to me that what I was doing was not considered part of the path towards women's liberation. In terms of my time as a breastfeeding mother and participant in LLL, I felt I had learned so much about myself and about my body. Surely this was part of the feminist manifesto? *Our bodies ourselves. A book by and for women* was published by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (later known as *Our bodies ourselves*) in the early 1970s and became a core text for feminists. As Louise Shaw writes in her history of LLL in New Zealand, 'these women discussed "liberation," but it was from formula companies, housework as an end in itself, from clocks and feeding schedules and, most notably, from a patriarchal health system that overlooked the needs of mothers and babies' (2014, p. 203).

In particular, there was rising concern at the medicalisation of birth. I am forever indebted to the knowledge I gained through the women in the League, which led to my being able to feel confident enough to give birth to my next three children at home. This certainly felt like an act of resistance against the often-dehumanising experience of women giving birth in hospital settings.

At a time when feminism was seemingly uninterested in including women as mothers, Playcentre provided an arena in which we felt we were feminists. It seemed easy to be a feminist in Playcentre, but not to be a mother at home in other feminist circles. Playcentre was run along democratic lines and was a full co-operative, with all tasks shared and regular meetings to address various issues. Throughout my time there, the parents involved were mainly women and a majority of relationships were heteronormative; increasingly, though, men came along to the weekly sessions, the centre camps, and the inevitable 'working bees'. These were not the only ways men participated: the Playcentre philosophy encouraged full involvement by fathers with their children. This was something that bell hooks saw as a contribution of the feminist movement:

One of the most positive interventions the feminist movement made on behalf of children was to create greater cultural awareness of the need for men to participate equally in parenting not just to create gender equity but to build better relationships with children. (2000, p. 75)

For me, the most interesting and enjoyable aspects of my time at Playcentre involved working with the other parents and learning the skills of group work and participation. With no immediate family living in Auckland, Eden-Epsom Playcentre became our support system, our 'village'. At some time during the mid-1980s, I suggested that when a new baby arrived in a family, we create a roster at Playcentre to deliver meals to the family for two weeks. My understanding is that, over 30 years later, this custom continues to be in place and has spread to other centres across Auckland.

Motherhood and the patriarchy

I have written about the tension between motherhood and feminism. I think this tension is partly explained by Adrienne Rich in her 1976 book *Of women born*:

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential - and all women - shall remain under male control. (1976, p. 13; original italics)

Rich makes it clear that her seminal work ‘is not an attack on the family or on mothering, *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy*’ (1976, p. 14; original italics). It was this patriarchal interpretation of motherhood that feminism was rejecting – an interpretation that denied women selfhood outside of motherhood. Blaffer Hrdy (2009, p. 239) likewise argues that there is no evolutionary evidence for this patriarchal view of motherhood.

I felt I was caught between what was regarded as ‘the institution of motherhood’ and my own lived experience. One of my favourite descriptions of that lived experience is by feminist writer Sara Ruddick, who captures beautifully, I think, the complexity of motherhood:

To suggest that mothers, by virtue of their mothering, are principally victims is an egregiously inaccurate account of many women’s experience and is itself oppressive to mothers. For many women, mothering begins in a fiercely passionate love that is not destroyed by the ambivalence and anger it includes. Many mothers develop early a sense of maternal competence – a sense that they can and will care for their children ... At home, mothers frequently have more control over the details of their work than other workers do. Many mothers, whatever their other work, feel part of a community of mothers whose warmth and support is hard to match in other working relationships. When their children flourish, almost all mothers have a sense of wellbeing. (1989, p. 29)

With the support of my husband and friends, my children were flourishing. Alongside that, my appreciation for feminism was beginning to flourish as well. This was helped along by a gradual letting go of my adherence to Catholic ideology. I had much to thank feminist activists for in the advances that were made for women. And while I still felt isolated at times from the movement, I had to remember what had preceded it. To quote Anne Manne again:

One must remember the backdrop of injustice that gave rise to feminism, and keep in mind the fact that in moments of intense cultural rebellion, balance and nuance fly out the window. Foolish things were said and done, but the essential work of dismantling the old coercive regime and the establishment of the practical and legislative framework of equality of opportunity was achieved. (2005, p. 35)

Nonetheless, in wider society it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain ‘just a mother at home’. That description never fitted me and my friends anyway, although we were sometimes at home, especially with a new-born. But we were also often engaged in other community activities, and doing the unpaid care work that society required both at home and in the voluntary space.

I was becoming increasingly aware that the ‘unpaid work’ in which I and my friends were involved was simply not counted when it came to any assessment of value, either in the government’s finance policies or the mainstream media. A few New Zealand writers at the time researched this issue and two important books were published. Marilyn Waring’s book, *Counting for nothing. What men value and what women are worth* (1988), took on the enormous task of looking at government and UN accounting and highlighting the complete absence from the balance sheet of much of women’s work. It is interesting that, at this time when I was feeling somewhat excluded from feminist gatherings, the foreword for Waring’s book was written by none other than Gloria Steinem, who was largely regarded as a leader of second-wave feminism in America. Perhaps our unpaid work was not as invisible to feminists as we had thought?

Anne Else (1996, p. 2) also wrote a significant book nearly a decade later, examining what she called the ‘False economy’. In writing about the ‘conflict between paid and unpaid work’, Else employs a vivid analogue:

The economy we hear about every day is like a BBC costume drama. Just as the audience barely glimpses the army of servants who cleaned those beautiful clothes and elegant houses, so you hardly notice the ranks of unpaid workers who keep the economy going behind the scenes. (1996, p. 2)

I will return to the invisibility of this unpaid work later in this article, when I consider the work of feminist economists.

Beyond the pre-school years

The organising skills we acquired at Playcentre were to prove very useful as my friends and I moved away from the early childhood years of parenting. In 1989, the New Zealand government launched an entirely new form of governance for schools. This reform of education was far reaching and known as 'Tomorrow's Schools' (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018). Many of us became involved with the newly created Boards of Trustees which were set up for each individual school. I was chair of a local primary school for five years and other Playcentre friends were in that same role at both primary and secondary institutions. Education was always a concern and an interest to those of us who participated in Playcentre, but we also became involved in other community and voluntary organisations, and many of us remain active in these groups to this day.

Care ethics

During the 1980s, several feminist thinkers were developing a theory that sought to transform the direction of philosophical and political thinking. Regarded as having come from the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), this theory was called care ethics. One of the main contributors to the development of this theory is Fiona Robinson, who explains it as follows:

Briefly, an ethics of care starts from a theory of the self as relational ... Beyond the claim that humans are 'social beings', the relational ontology of care ethics claims that relations of interdependence and dependence are a fundamental feature of our existence. (2011, p. 40)

This theory seems particularly applicable to the role that I and others had been performing as mothers, friends, and members of child-centred groups. While this dependency/interdependency relationship was prominent in the family, we were all in relationship within these groups, well aware of the dependency of our small children, and also our own interdependency with one another.

Neoliberalism arrives

Feminism was emerging as a disruptive force in the 1970s and 1980s. Alongside the feminist movement another disruptive force, which was about to hit Aotearoa/New Zealand, was in development. The economic belief system now widely known as 'neo-liberalism' or 'neo-classicism' was sweeping through many of the world's political economies. There are many lengthy definitions of this ideology, but Fraser's succinct description will suffice: 'Reversing the previous formula, which sought to "use politics to tame markets," proponents of this new form of capitalism proposed to use markets to tame politics' (2009, p. 107).

Neo-liberalism has continued to be the dominant ideology ruling many governments' policies for the last four decades. And when a snap election occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1984, the new supposedly left-leaning Labour party came into government and immediately set out on its neo-liberal journey. The Minister of Finance at the time was Roger

Douglas, and the actions that he unleashed on Aotearoa/New Zealand quickly became known as ‘Rogernomics’. These reforms resulted in the selling of many Aotearoa/New Zealand assets and the restructuring of government departments into commercial enterprises. I am concerned here with the impact of these reforms on women, an impact that was keenly felt through what David Harvey describes as:

[the] ‘creative destruction’, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers ... but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart (2005, p. 3).

Neo-liberalism’s destructive path thus stood in polar opposition to the relational core of the developing philosophy of care ethics.

The Labour government’s neo-liberal agenda opened the door to an even harsher agenda when the National Party was returned to government in 1990. During an interview a few years before she became the Minister for Finance in this National government, MP Ruth Richardson commented that leaving a violent marriage and going on the DPB (Domestic Purposes Benefit) was ‘simply moving from partner dependency to state dependency’ (Else, 1996, p. 107). When the interviewer Gordon Campbell asked her, ‘But surely one is beating you up, and the other isn’t?’, Richardson ‘brightly replied’, ‘That’s right, but in the end the state just might beat out of you your will to become self-sufficient’ (quoted in Else, 1996, p.107).

This appalling statement sounded the death knell for any maintenance of a decent social security system – especially for women. In 1991, Richardson introduced a budget which severely cut government spending and, as she had indicated in her interview with Campbell, benefit rates were slashed. This myth of ‘self-sufficiency’ continues to be at the core of social policies in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Richardson named her 1991 budget ‘The mother of all budgets’ (James, 2016, p. 3), a terrible use of that moniker. It is hard to imagine mothers doing to their children what this budget inflicted on many in society. ‘Ruthanasia’, a term coined by the media to describe its horror (James, 2016, p. 3), now became a descriptor to accompany Rogernomics. It was clear that no ‘care’ had been taken in the decisions leading up to this budget. No care of children, families, or the women doing the work in these families. It was this punitive action, and a deep concern around the consequences for children, that led University of Auckland economist Susan St John to gather a group of women, myself included, to discuss this situation and come up with a plan for action. And so, in 1994, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) was formed.

My attention now turned to helping get this evidence-based group off the ground. All the foundational members of the group were women. I cannot speak for the others and say that we all considered ourselves feminists, but I certainly did. The label ‘child-centred’ feminist (Manne, 2010, p. 264) may have applied as well. Regardless of labels, we all felt deeply for the families who were affected by these punitive measures and especially for the solo parents, the majority of whom were women, who were caring for these children in such difficult circumstances.

Richardson’s targeting of ‘dependency’ was being played out across neo-liberal states (Fraser & Gordon 2013). Here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Alternative Welfare Working Group Justice for All stated in its 2010 report:

The persistent use of the word ‘dependent’ has been an important part of the process of treating benefit recipients as ‘outsiders’, ‘others’, people who, it is implied, do not belong in our society. In many respects it has become an acceptable alternative to the more directly critical term, ‘bludgers’. (2010, p. 47)

The attack on women as mothers and beneficiaries continued. In their drive to end ‘dependency’, Richardson and those who agreed with her policies completely ignored their

own dependency on others. In particular, they scorned the care work carried out on their behalf. It is this 'privileged irresponsibility' that Joan C. Tronto notes in her book *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*, where she states, 'By not noticing how pervasive and central care is to human life, those who are in a position of power and privilege can continue to ignore and to degrade the activities of care and those who give care' (1993, p. 111; cited in Barnes, 2012, p. 7).

Feminist economics

During my time working with CPAG, I began to look for explanations for and alternatives to the decisions being made under this neo-liberal order which were impacting so heavily on women. Susan St John was providing significant economic analysis of social policy for CPAG, and I have already mentioned the work of two other Aotearoa/New Zealand researchers and writers, Marilyn Waring and Anne Else. And, while my relationship with the feminist movement had previously been uneasy, it was in the writings of feminist economists that I found some published work with which to challenge the dominant neo-liberal economic thesis. Writers such as Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson in the United States and Sue Himmelweit in the United Kingdom were questioning the reasoning that underpinned economics. They were particularly concerned with the lack of attention given to 'care' and family relationships. Similarly, in their book, *Affective equality: Love, care, and justice*, Kathleen Lynch, John Baker, and Maureen Lyons write:

Part of the agenda of feminist economics is to investigate the apparently 'value free, politically neutral, gender blind' assumptions and values embedded in the neoclassical paradigm, particularly in those areas that cross the affective domain and bear directly on women's lives and experiences. (2009, p. 18)

Lynch, Baker, and Lyons make a further point about the failings of an economic ideal which creates a sphere based on the rational man:

This sphere disallows the use of the language of care and love in the public domain and in so doing silences carers and care recipients. If issues of love and care cannot enter public *discourse* as matters of serious political concern they cannot enter the world of *policy*, and if they are not on the policy agenda they are not on the *political* agenda. (2009, p. 92; original italics)

This is why the work of groups such as CPAG is so important, in its efforts to place the items of love and care firmly on the political agenda.

Attitude to solo mothers

It is incomprehensible to me that the impossible situation in which many women still find themselves was introduced by another woman: Ruth Richardson. Furthermore, it is incomprehensible that our Prime Minister of many years, Helen Clark, did very little to reverse this damage. The constant war on solo parents continues in different ways, with solo mothers' relationship status coming under state scrutiny. Since we now live in an age of surveillance, the war has become far more invasive. As St John states:

Work and Income peers into the bedrooms of the poor to see if the sole parent is co-habiting and therefore not entitled to a benefit. On the other hand, the IRD [Inland Revenue Department], even less qualified in social matters, peers into the bedrooms of the poor to see if she is not co-habiting, so that she can be denied the IWTC [In-Work Tax Credit] for her children. (2014, p. 8)

So much for the ‘lesser government’ that neo-liberalism promised. But it is a choosy invasion to which St John refers. In her article, ‘Top girls’, Angela McRobbie discusses the discriminatory nature of the new sexual contract:

[T]his attention to the young women’s reproductive capacity frequently takes place within a discourse which is underpinned by normative assumptions about race and cultural difference with punitive outcomes for those young women whose sexual activities are construed, for reasons of their poverty and ethnicity, as pathological. (2007, p. 731)

To be productive, in a market sense, is to be lauded. However, to engage in reproduction is contingent on your circumstances. This was made very clear in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2012, when the then Minister for Social Development, Paula Bennett, promoted the plan to offer free contraception to women beneficiaries and their daughters (Migone & Levy, 2012). The targeted nature of this policy initiative smacked of social engineering and was an attack on these women’s agency over their own reproduction. The scheme was abandoned in 2018 (Hutton, 2018).

I have spent some time on the issue of the treatment of solo parents and their relationship status, as it is one of the main sources of inequality for women and one of the sites of gender injustice that drives my continuing interest in feminist action. In my involvement with CPAG, Auckland City Mission Family 100 Project, and Ngā Tāngata Microfinance, I have seen, and continue to see, the extraordinary strength of so many women. Regardless of their personal circumstances, they put their children first and are inventive in finding ways to survive. It should not be like this. The feminist movement should not tolerate this. bell hooks is very clear about feminism’s failings in this regard:

Feminist focus on careerism, getting women employed in high-paying professions, not only alienated masses of women from the feminist movement; it also allowed feminist activists to ignore the fact that increased entry of bourgeois women into the workforce was not a sign that women as a group were gaining economic power. Had they looked at the economic situation of poor and working class women, they would have seen the growing problem of unemployment and increased entry of women from all classes into the ranks of the poor ... There is no feminist agenda in place offering women a way out - a way to rethink work. (2000, p. 51)

This was written nearly 20 years ago, yet nothing has changed. It is telling that Marilyn Waring has followed up her major (1988) work, *Counting for nothing*, with a book called *Still counting* (2018).

Reflection

Early in this article, I included a portion of a quote from Adrienne Rich. The full quote ends with these lines about Rich’s mother: ‘But in my landscape or hers, there would be old, smoldering patches of deep burning anger’ (1976, p. 221). I cannot speak for my mother, but I do know that I have these ‘patches of deep burning anger’. They are not on my own account, but on account of the treatment of these women I have written about above. I have never understood why the women of Aotearoa/New Zealand have not been outraged at the treatment of solo parents. While many women are simply trying to get by themselves, others have benefitted greatly from the increasing inequality in our country. Part of the answer may lie in the definition of caring first offered by Fisher and Tronto (1990) and reproduced by Tronto: ‘[W]e suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we live in it as well as possible.*’ (Tronto, 2013, p. 19; original italics)

Ann Bartos looks at this definition through a ‘critical lens of care ethics’ and explores how ‘caring practices do not necessarily result in care’ (2017, p. 67). It seems possible to me that, as Bartos shows, efforts to maintain our own world do not always result in care for others. This

could partly explain the seeming neglect of some women's situation by others. I know that I have been guilty of this in the past.

I have attempted to give some context to my own journey in feminism. This journey continues of course; as Sara Ahmed writes, 'To be a feminist is to stay a student' (2017, p. 11). I was a student in Dublin, Ireland for a year during 2011–2012. I undertook a Masters in Equality Studies, which had a significant emphasis on gender inequality. It was there that my feminist journey was further enriched. I was introduced to the developing theory of intersectional feminism, largely attributed to the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991; see also Romero, 2018, p. 39). I realised that this theory provided a very useful analytical tool for explaining the complexities of feminism. That year I spent in Ireland, seeing the reality of how Irish women were treated by the Catholic Church, led me to end my relationship with Catholicism once and for all.

Ahmed (2017) urges feminists to have a 'survival toolkit'. Item number eight in this toolkit is 'humour' (p. 245). I am grateful to my mother for so much in life, and her ever-present sense of humour as a necessity in daily life is a legacy I carry with me in my own toolkit.

I began with a quote from Carol Gilligan, and I return to her for some final words: 'I see feminism as one of the great liberation movements in human history. It is the movement to free democracy from patriarchy' (2011, p. 176). I am fortunate to be the mother of one daughter and three sons. My concern is for all of them to be freed from the constraints of the patriarchy. In describing the 'incoherence at the centre of patriarchy', Gilligan suggests that 'in essence, patriarchy harms both men and women by forcing men to act as though they don't have or need relationships and women to act as though they don't have or need a self' (2018, p. 6). She sees an ethic of care as being central to this movement: 'In the end, care ethics endures, it resonates, because it speaks to a widespread sense of unease that somehow our priorities are wrong – that what really matters to us, in a deeply moral sense, has somehow been left behind' (p.15).

I agree. In May of this year, CPAG held its annual post-budget gathering. I walked in to help and there they all were – on the reception desk, setting tables, in the kitchen, and greeting speakers and guests. My old friends from LLL and Playcentre. All hands-on-deck at the cleaning-up time. An ethic of care in practice. We learned our organisational skills and activism within these groups. We will keep going as long as the need is there.

JULIA E. TIMMINS has a Masters in Equality Studies from University College Dublin, Ireland. She has been a lifelong student of feminism, and as one of the founding members of Child Poverty Action Group in Aotearoa/New Zealand, is passionate about ending child poverty in this country and improving the circumstances for all women raising children. She is a Trustee of Ngā Tāngata Microfinance.

Notes

1. In referring to the 'second wave' of feminism, I am influenced by Nancy Fraser and her description of two phases within that wave. The period I am concerned with, the second phase, is described by Fraser as 'the figure of the struggle for recognition so thoroughly captured the feminist imagination that ... [t]he effect was to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition' (2013, p. 4)
2. As Raewyn Dalziel (2018) reports, 'The first women's liberation group was formed in 1970 by students at Victoria University, when Therese O'Connell successfully applied for a grant from the Students' Association to start a Women's Liberation Front Club.'

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