

Mothers Joining Together in Sisterhood

Women Strike for Peace and the National Welfare Rights Organization in the 1960s and 1970s

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the mainly white, middle-class women of Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and the black welfare recipients of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) came together for a number of joint events. Through these actions, they protested military spending and cutbacks in domestic funding, and demanded more power for women within the nation's political institutions. This article explores this unusual and largely overlooked coalition. It contends that the alliance was possible, in part, because both groups had evolved from single-issue movements to view themselves as part of a broader struggle for peace, racial and economic justice, and women's rights. But the partnership was also shaped by these women's belief in motherhood as a basis for activism and a source of unity. Indeed, even as WSP and NWRO increasingly identified with the feminist movement, activists continued to relate to one another as mothers. Thus, this study contributes to a better understanding of the diverse relationship between maternalism and feminism. However, while a shared sense of responsibility as mothers helped bring WSP and NWRO together during this period, cooperation was ultimately short-lived, and this article also examines the divides of race and class that hindered the development of a more sustained alliance.

On 22 May 1973, members of Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) came together in Washington, D.C., to protest the bombing of Cambodia, the military budget and cutbacks in domestic funding. "A Call to All Women," leaflets for the event proclaimed, promising a joint action "by women who feel that people are more important than bombs" (Women Strike and NWRO). At a time when the Watergate scandal was increasingly eroding President Nixon's authority and Congress was

beginning to use its power to limit funding for military activity in Southeast Asia, the demonstration brought some 300 women together under banners such as “Impeach the Mad Bomber” and “2 Weeks Bombing = Health Cutbacks.” During a speak out on the steps of the Capitol, welfare rights leader Beulah Sanders called for a coalition with WSP to fight for a reduction in military spending and support funds for health, education and welfare. Importantly, these activists appealed to one another, and to the public, as women and as mothers. Addressing the crowd, Congresswoman and WSP leader Bella Abzug declared, “What we do here today, we do for our children and the children of the world.” She urged women to seek more power, arguing that, “Women of all kinds have an obligation to reflect on the fact that there are no women Watergate witnesses, and no women in the Pentagon Papers.” After the rally outside the Capitol, some protesters went inside to lobby their representatives in Congress, while the rest formed a picket line in front of the White House (“Timely Action in D.C.”; Brozan).

This event, which was billed as the first mass demonstration since the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, was in many respects anticlimactic. Although WSP declared the action “an effective day in Washington,” it received virtually no media attention.¹ Coming on the heels of an era grown accustomed to massive, confrontational protests against the war in Vietnam, the rally was small and relatively sedate. It was certainly nothing compared to some of the large-scale assemblages that both WSP and NWRO had sponsored in the past.² However, the historical significance of the 22 May 1973 demonstration lies in the unusual and often overlooked coalition that it highlights between the mainly white, middle-class women of WSP and the black welfare recipients who made up NWRO. As Stephanie Gilmore has noted, scholars tend to study activists and organisations in the context of distinct social movements and rarely pay much attention to alliances across difference (3-4). But analysing these cross-movement coalitions and the conditions that encouraged their occurrence is vital for understanding the complexities of social change.³

This article explores the factors that brought WSP and NWRO together during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It contends that this coalition was possible, in part, because both groups had evolved from single-issue movements to view themselves as part of a broader struggle for peace, racial and economic justice, and women’s rights. Nevertheless, even as they increasingly identified with the feminist movement, members of WSP and NWRO continued to relate to one another as mothers. Indeed, this article examines how motherhood, as a socially constructed gender ideology, provided these women with a basis for activism, and facilitated coalition building across the lines of race and class. Thus, it also contributes to a better understanding of the diverse relationship between maternalism and feminism.

Women's Strike for Peace was born on 1 November 1961, when an estimated 50,000 women across the United States staged a one-day protest against nuclear testing and the arms race with the Soviet Union. Participants in this event were largely white, middle-class, middle-aged women, and its organisers identified themselves as "housewives—working women—and for the most part, mothers" (MacNees 4). Following on from this one-day action, these women put down roots to form a permanent organisation and, from 1963 onwards, they waged an intense campaign against the war in Vietnam. As with their earlier anti-nuclear activism, WSP appealed to the public as mothers. A Mother's Day ad circulated by WSP in 1966 explained, "We don't want our sons to die for a corrupt Saigon regime whose own people do not support it.... We do not want our sons to kill women and children whose only crime is to live in a country ripped by civil war ... WE MOTHERS ARE FED UP WITH POLITICIANS AND PRESIDENTS WHO PREACH PEACE BUT PRACTICE WAR" ("This Mother's Day"). Indeed, WSPers consistently stressed their concern for all children and argued that, as mothers, they had a responsibility to defend life. As several recent historians have noted, WSP's emphasis on motherhood stemmed, in part, from strategic considerations. Although many WSPers were motivated by genuine maternal concerns, they also recognised maternalism as an effective means to avoid red baiting and secure public support for their cause (Schneidhorst 16; Estepa 87-88).

In addition, members of WSP viewed motherhood as a powerful basis for gender solidarity. From the onset, when they appealed to other women for support—be it presidents' wives, peace activists in other countries, or "ordinary American women"—they did so as mothers. This was epitomised in an early letter to First Lady Jackie Kennedy, in which WSP implored, "Surely no mother today can feel that her duty as a mother has been fulfilled until she has spoken out for life instead of death, for peace instead of war" (Letter to Mrs. John F. Kennedy). Yet, despite this universal maternal rhetoric, during its early years WSP made little attempt to reach out to women from different racial or socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, although there was much debate over the subject, WSP never took an official stand in support of the civil rights movement during the early 1960s. While most WSPers claimed to support civil rights in principle, many were wary of diluting WSP's anti-nuclear message and alienating potential support (*Issues for Discussion*; Schneidhorst 54; Estepa 89-91).

Interestingly, however, those members of WSP who did advocate taking a more active role in the civil rights movement during these early years often couched their argument in the language of motherhood. They asserted that the goals of the peace and civil rights movements were the same, "a world where every child may live and grow in peace and dignity" (Hamburg). Over the

coming decade, many more WSPers would come to view the struggle to end the war overseas and the fight against racism and poverty at home as inseparable. They increasingly made connections between militarism abroad and violence in America's cities, and they began to view escalating military spending as linked to social deprivation (Estepa 93-94). Furthermore, as activists came to recognise that "peace is not an isolated issue," they argued that, "WSP cannot stand alone in the fight" ("We're Not Blowing Our Horn" 2).

Meanwhile, welfare recipients had also been organising on the local level since the early 1960s. Faced with inadequate monthly payments, an increasing emphasis on work requirements for mothers on welfare, and a host of regulations that encroached on their privacy and restricted their sexual freedom, women on welfare began banding together to demand economic resources and more control over their lives. While welfare recipients initiated many of these local groups themselves, others were organised with the help of churches, social services agencies, and civil rights and student activists (Nadasen xv). These efforts culminated in 1967, when former civil rights activist, George Wiley, helped bring together welfare rights activists from around the country to form the National Welfare Rights Organization. Although NWRO was conceived as an interracial mass movement, the overwhelming majority of members were black single mothers on welfare (Valk 41). Throughout their various campaigns, welfare rights activists drew heavily upon the moral authority of motherhood, continually emphasising the damaging effects that poverty had on their children's physical and emotional well being. As one activist in Boston explained, "It is not us you punish when you deny us our rights, it is our children" (qtd. in Marchand). Welfare rights activists also justified their activism by stressing their protective instincts as mothers. At a protest in New York in 1967, Beulah Sanders warned that "No mother will see her children go hungry or without clothing" (qtd. in "Few Take Part in Welfare March"). By foregrounding their status as mothers and stressing their concern for their children, welfare recipients sought to win public sympathy and to challenge prevalent theories that cast "the black matriarchy" as a destructive force in African American society.⁴

Like members of WSP, welfare recipients contrasted their own maternal concerns with the government's disregard for life in Vietnam (Valk 45). But theirs was a perspective heavily informed by race and class. "You talk about birth control," New York activist Irene Gibbs accused welfare officials, "but you want our undernourished, illegitimate and undereducated children to be gun food in Vietnam" (Gibbs). Welfare recipients pointed to the fact that blacks were dying in higher proportions to whites and they criticised the government for being more rigorous in assessing a child's eligibility for welfare than in assessing men's eligibility for the draft (Valk 45-46). As one welfare recipient

from Philadelphia put it, “They don’t say when they’re getting ready to send your children overseas ‘Are you illegitimate?’” (qtd. in Honsa). Furthermore, recipients often contended that the cost of war would come out of the mouths of children.

Welfare rights activists also saw their identity as mothers as an important basis from which to reach out to other women. In 1967, when NWRO Chair Johnnie Tillmon wrote to various women’s organisations appealing for support, she explained, “We are mothers from that ‘other America’—mothers on welfare struggling to raise our children decently... We need your support and encouragement—help from American mothers who are already organized and participating in making this country a better place to raise children.” Tillmon concluded, “We believe that the mothers of America can join together in ‘sisterhood for human rights’” (Letter to Women’s Group Leaders). But, as this letter demonstrates, by 1967 welfare rights leaders no longer relied solely on the rhetoric of motherhood to forge connections with other women. In advocating a struggle based on “sisterhood,” they also engaged the rhetoric of second-wave feminism.

Indeed, by the end of the 1960s, both NWRO and WSP began to identify themselves as part of the broader women’s liberation movement. This shift was brought about by a number of factors. Political struggles provided women with new skills and a heightened sense of personal efficiency, while frequently bringing them into conflict with male-dominated power structures and, in the case of welfare recipients, the male organisers within their own organisation. At the same time, the growing visibility of the feminist movement offered activists potential new allies and new frameworks for understanding their grievances (Nadasen 214; Valk 52, 54). The transition was not always an easy one. Many members of WSP were shocked by the heavy criticism they received from radical young feminists who saw their reliance on traditional gender roles as outdated and politically ineffective. Nevertheless, conflicts with radical feminists were often consciousness-raising experiences that encouraged WSP women to question their place within the gender hierarchy (Swerdlow 4-5, 137-141). By the early 1970s, many WSPers viewed war and militarism as inextricably linked to, as Bella Abzug put it, the “white, middle class, middle-aged, male power structure,” and they demanded more power for women within the nation’s social and political institutions (“Blames U.S. Ills on Male Chauvinism”). Meanwhile, welfare rights activists began to make connections between women’s vulnerability to poverty and her subordinate status within society. In 1972, Johnnie Tillmon argued that women were more likely to end up on welfare, “Because we are the worst-educated, the least-skilled, and the lowest-paid people there are. Because we have to be almost totally responsible for our children. Because we are regarded by everybody as dependents”

(“Welfare is a Women’s Issue” 111). Thus, these activists came to view both war and welfare as women’s issues. Importantly, WSP and NWRO developed distinctive versions of feminism, shaped by their particular social location. For example, welfare recipients tended to combine an analysis of race, class and gender in a way that the middle-class women of WSP did not. Nevertheless, both groups came to define themselves as part of a larger women’s movement. On 26 August 1970, WSP and NWRO participated in the first Women’s Strike for Equality (Klemesrud). Furthermore, both groups increasingly sought to build ties with other women’s organisations.

In this context, WSP and NWRO began to view one another as potential allies. In fall 1970, Johnnie Tillmon wrote directly to WSP calling for the two groups work together, “both functionally and supportively,” in the attainment of their common goals of “ending the war in Asia and at home against the poor.” Tillmon argued that the link binding NWRO and WSP was “the fact that we represent two of the most effective women’s organizations in this country” (qtd. in “Warfare Versus Welfare”). Cooperation between the two groups took a variety of different forms. From the late sixties onwards, both groups began to report on each other’s activities in their local and national newsletters. In particular, WSP regularly printed articles that educated its middle-class members about welfare and encouraged them to donate money or attend demonstrations in support of welfare rights. Furthermore, movement leaders frequently endorsed or participated in one another’s events. NWRO’s Children’s March for Survival in March 1972 featured a diverse range of speakers, including WSP’s own Bella Abzug (“50,000 Say No to FAP” 7). Meanwhile, Beulah Sanders became a frequent speaker at anti-war demonstrations (“Mrs. Sanders Speaks At DC Antiwar Rally”; Kornbluh 154). WSPers and welfare rights activists also came together at the local level for a number of actions. On 8 March 1971, International Women’s Day, representatives from the San Francisco chapter of WSP joined a delegation of around 50 welfare rights activists in Sacramento to protest Governor Reagan’s proposed welfare cuts. The WSP women argued that the real cause of California’s financial crisis was not welfare but military spending, and they accused Reagan of using welfare recipients “as scapegoats of a sick, militarist society” (“Warfare Versus Welfare”; “WSP Join Welfare Mothers in Sacramento”). Two days earlier, WSPers and welfare recipients in Philadelphia organised a “women’s coalition conference” to explore how they could work together to end poverty, war and repression (“Philadelphia Story”). Through all of these actions, WSP and NWRO sought to highlight the links between war expenditure and domestic poverty. They also hoped to unite women into a strong political force, contending that if women had more power, the nation’s priorities would be very different.

What is striking, however, is that these women continued to identify

themselves, first and foremost, as mothers. In a statement published in WSP's newsletter *Memo* in 1970, welfare rights leader Beulah Sanders maintained that, "Women Strike for Peace and Welfare mothers have much in common. We are all working to save the children." Sanders argued that, "All mothers, black and white, poor and middle class, must get together to wage a stronger fight against the government to change our priorities from death and destruction to human needs" (Sanders). Welfare recipients and peace activists related to one another as mothers putting aside their differences to make the world a better place for their children (Estepa 86). Even as both groups came to view themselves as part of a larger struggle for social justice and women's liberation, they continued to see motherhood as a unifying identity and a powerful basis for activism.

However, while a shared sense of responsibility as mothers helped bring WSP and NWRO together in the early seventies, the divides of race and class hindered the development of a more sustained alliance. Despite assertions of a universal maternal perspective, WSP women and welfare rights activists both "operated from a worldview constructed out of their daily lives" (Gilmore 2). For the white middle-class women of WSP, concerned with protecting America's sons and safeguarding all the world's children, putting an end to the war and the draft was always the top priority. In contrast, welfare recipients often faced more immediate threats to their children's well being, such as the daily perils of poverty and racism (Estepa 94). Indeed, it is important to note that not all welfare rights activists opposed the war—some saw the military as an opportunity for their sons to escape unemployment, demoralisation and drugs ("Philadelphia Story"; Estepa 92, 94). And even among those who objected to the costs of war, many viewed it as a peripheral concern. As WSP and NWRO attempted to work together, these differences did not go unacknowledged. Many WSPers testified that their involvement in the welfare rights movement opened their eyes to the particular problems and views of low-income women. A report on the Philadelphia conference, for example, noted that "suburban women whose sons go to college learned firsthand about the lives of poor and black women whose sons are underfed and undereducated until they reach 18, when the military is eager to grab them" ("Philadelphia Story"). Furthermore, at the suggestion of welfare rights activists, several WSP chapters encouraged their members to live on a welfare budget for a week to deepen their understanding of what these issues meant in terms of real hunger ("Philadelphia Story"; "Seattle Women Join Welfare Mothers"). As well as these symbolic actions, some WSP chapters sought to offer more tangible support by encouraging members to donate money to "help more welfare mothers exercise their political rights" ("Warfare Versus Welfare"; Women Strike and NWRO). Nevertheless, although WSP's leaders began to prioritise organising across race

and class divisions, this did not always resonate with the rank-and-file, and some members grew concerned that the movement was straying too far from their primary task of stopping U.S. militarism (Estepa 100; Siegel). Meanwhile, some NWRO members worried that coalition building would dilute the welfare rights message and force welfare recipients to compete for resources with people who were wealthier and better educated than themselves (Kornbluh 171). As a result, these groups' rhetorical commitments were not always backed up with grassroots support or sustained action. In 1973, WSP leader Cora Weiss reflected, "We have made a dent among blacks, but not a terribly significant one ... WSP has always tried to reach out and understand intellectually that their issue [minority groups] is our issue, but getting it together on a large scale is another matter" (qtd. in Brozan).

Although the alliance between WSP and NWRO was limited and ultimately short-lived, it reveals much about the relationship between maternalism and feminism, and the possibilities for coalition building across race and class. The partnership between WSP and NWRO reflected the broadening political agendas and emerging feminist ideals of both groups. But it was also rooted in these women's identities as mothers and their belief in motherhood as a source of unity. As such, this coalition complicates existing narratives of second-wave feminism. Recently numerous scholars have shattered the myth that the women's liberation movement was predominantly comprised of young, middle-class, white women; instead revealing the diversity of participants and their goals.⁵ Nevertheless, while scholars have highlighted the race and class biases in early narratives of the women's movement, few have recognised the generational blinders and there continues to be little attention paid to the feminist activism of middle-aged women and mothers. This neglect is symptomatic of the fact that many radical young feminists during the 1960s and 1970s denounced motherhood as an oppressive institution, and scorned movements that emphasised the maternal role. These young feminists accused such movements of perpetuating an essentialist view of women that reinforced her marginal status and inhibited the struggle for female equality and empowerment (Swerdlow 238). In doing so, they fuelled the perception that motherhood and maternalist movements were inherently incompatible with feminism.⁶

However, this study reveals a more complex picture. Although the women of WSP and NWRO emphasised ostensibly traditional notions of maternal responsibilities in order to enter the political arena, they simultaneously challenged these roles by politicising motherhood and rejecting the mother's assignment to the domestic sphere (Valk 39-40; Swerdlow 12-13, 242-243). By speaking publicly as mothers, the black women in the welfare rights movement also challenged racialised notions of femininity, in which "good motherhood" was codified white. Furthermore, over the course of their activism, women in both

organisations came to view themselves not just as mothers acting on behalf of their children, but as women struggling for autonomy and self-determination (Nadasen 237). Importantly, embracing feminism did not necessarily require rejecting maternalism. Instead, members of WSP and NWRO formulated distinctive versions of feminism, rooted in their identities as mothers. Writing in 1971, welfare rights leader Jeannette Washington called for women to unite in order to challenge “the male power-holding group of this nation.” Contending that women needed to “organize, agitate, pressure and demand; not beg,” she declared, “We must make them remember that we, as mothers and as women, are concerned about the survival of our children, of all human life” (Washington 78). Washington’s statement resonates strikingly with an assertion made by WSP’s Jeanne Webber in 1970 that, “As we move now into more militant times in which women are challenging the old truisms about women’s role, we continue to find a valid footing in the idea that women, as givers of life, have a special role to play in working for world peace” (Webber 18). For welfare rights and peace activists, motherhood offered a powerful basis from which to fight for social justice and feminist change. Moreover, it provided the foundation on which these two very different groups of women were able to establish a cooperative, albeit tentative, alliance during the early 1970s.

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¹WSP reported that the demonstration was given local television coverage in Washington and Philadelphia (“Timely Action in D.C.” 1), but it did not receive a mention in national newspapers such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.

²For example, NWRO’s Children’s March for Survival on 25 May 1972 attracted an estimated 50,000 participants, while later that year around 3,000 women and children turned out for the Ring Around Congress on 22 June, which WSP helped organise (“50,000 Say No to FAP”; “Ring Around Congress” 6).

³See Gilmore for an insightful analysis of this tendency to neglect cross-movement coalitions. Illustrating Gilmore’s arguments, the alliance between WSP and NWRO has been largely overlooked within recent scholarship on both movements, receiving at best a passing mention. An important exception to this is Estepa’s excellent article on the evolution of WSP during the late sixties, in which she explored how WSPers came to develop alliances with activists from different races, generations and socioeconomic backgrounds—including

many poor women of colour. Estepa demonstrated that it was their identities as mothers that defined WSP's relationship with their coalition partners (86). This article builds on Estepa's study, which primarily looked at these alliances from WSP's perspective, by also examining ideas about motherhood within the welfare rights movement.

⁴Theoharis has argued that, for black women during this period, claiming a public position as mothers was in itself an act of resistance, as it stood in direct opposition to prevalent theories, popularised by the Moynihan Report, that blamed "the black matriarchy" for the "tangle of pathology" in the black community (18-20). For an interesting discussion of welfare recipients' attempts to challenge these pathological views of black motherhood and foreground their own vision of "Mother Power," see Valk 40-51. Also see Nadasen 31-33; Orleck 149.

⁵See Springer, Roth, Valk, and Thompson, to name but a few.

⁶It is important to note that feminist critiques of motherhood were never universal, even at their height during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Umansky pointed out, they were always accompanied by a more positive feminist discourse that viewed motherhood, free from the trappings of patriarchy, as a source of power for women (2-3). Nevertheless, the so-called "negative discourse" continues to hold sway within the literature on second-wave feminism, and relatively little attention has been paid to those women who attempted to balance motherhood and feminist activism during this period. For further discussion, see Umansky; Estepa, 103-104.

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