

Envisioning Mothers

Visualizations and the Invisibility of Motherhood

Women in the U.S. and Canada pay a substantial social and economic penalty for becoming mothers. And though the existence of a “motherhood penalty” has been extensively demonstrated, motherhood itself has not been widely recognized as a marginalized identity. In this article, I review several popular visualizations (graphical representations, imagery, infographics, etc.) used to depict inequality and oppression to propose that—despite mothers paying a motherhood penalty—motherhood remains an invisible category in current representations of social inequity. I suggest that by subsuming mothers under the category of “women,” current visualizations obscure how gender discrimination (particularly economic discrimination) results from women’s status as “mothers” rather than their status as “women.” As a result, we miss the central role that motherhood plays in women’s social and economic oppression. Motherhood is rarely recognized as an identity that contributes to women’s inequality, and I argue here that this is partially due to its invisibility in popular visualizations of oppression. As a result, I argue that motherhood should appear as an analytic category in our popular visualization of oppression to increase its visibility as a marginalized identity. Such visibility would increase social justice activism around issues of motherhood and would raise public awareness of motherhood as a significant social identity within the context of oppression and inequality.

“Why then is maternity not understood to be a subject position and, hence, not theorized as with other subject positions in terms of the intersectionality of gendered oppression and resistance?” (O’Reilly 6).

In this article, I explore the ways in which motherhood, as an identity category,

has generally been overlooked in visualizations (graphical representations, imagery, infographics, etc.) of inequality and oppression. Specifically, I consider several popular graphics that visualize conventional wisdom regarding social and economic inequality. I argue that these depictions subsume motherhood into the larger category of gender and in doing so obscure the material ways that gender discrimination (particularly economic discrimination) happens as a result of women's status as mothers. I begin with a review of the literature on the motherhood wage penalty to demonstrate why it is motherhood—not necessarily gender—that largely explains the income inequality women face. I then consider the broader social consequences of the precarious economic situation that mothers face as a result of wage inequality. I review the recent research on the causal relationship between motherhood and poverty to suggest that motherhood should occupy a more visible position in our understanding of social and economic inequality. Finally, I argue that motherhood should appear as an analytic category in popular visualizations of oppression to increase its visibility as a marginalized identity. Doing so would not only increase social justice activism around issues of motherhood but would also foster opportunities for more public recognition of what has, for too long, been seen as an individual rather than a social inequality.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

Visualizations have become a popular way to rapidly communicate complex information (Gallicano). Visual representations of information can tell a story that would otherwise remain convoluted and can increase comprehension of complex material (Brigham). As a result, graphics that visualize social and economic inequality for a general audience have become more frequent. Figures A, B, and C below represent a sample of these visualizations, which generally include categories such as race, class, sexuality, age, ability, nationality, and sometimes a variety of others to draw attention to the ways that social identities manifest as social and economic inequality. These visualizations have been useful in drawing attention to the ways that inequality operates in Western society and in demonstrating how social identities can intersect in ways that exacerbate social oppression. As a result, they have become widely used as a resource both in educational endeavours and in social justice activism.

Although the intention of these graphics is to simplify, they can sometimes obscure compelling data points (Brigham). Such is the case with the popular imagery used to denote social and economic inequality, whereby gender is noted as a singular social category of either privilege (if you are male or a man) or oppression (if you are female or a woman). I argue that this categorization misses a key aspect of women's oppression, namely the economic and social

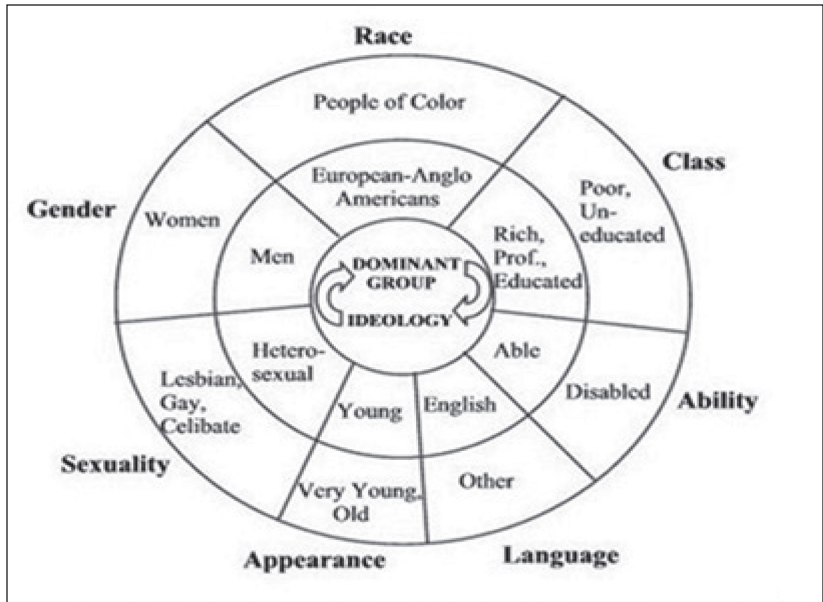


Figure A

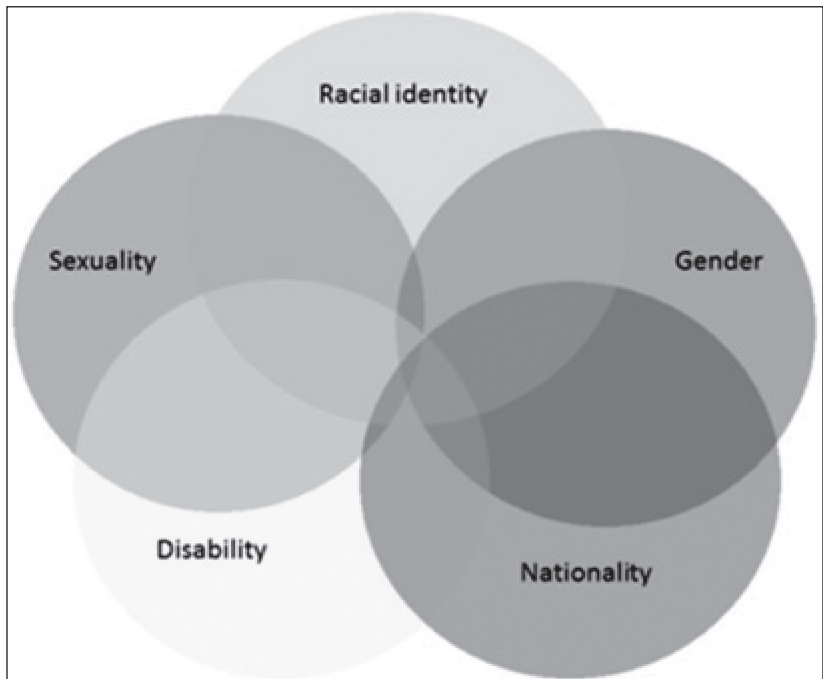


Figure B

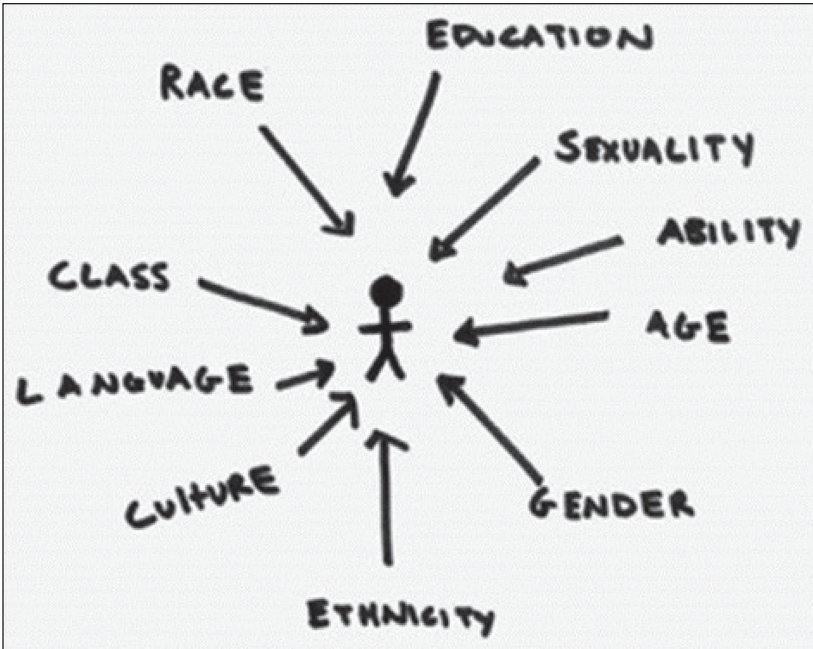


Figure C

inequality associated with motherhood. Furthermore, it masks the economic and social benefits that attend fatherhood and renders parental status invisible in the nexus of oppression. As I explore below, much of the economic inequality (and subsequent social vulnerability) women face is connected to their status as mothers, not solely to their status as women.

The Cost of Motherhood

Scholarship in sociology and economics has been unequivocal when it comes to the role of parenthood during employment: mothers pay a penalty and fathers reap a bonus (Hegewisch and Hartmann; Misra and Murray-Close; Viitanen; Zhang, “Earnings of Women,” “Can Motherhood”). Progress has been made, and there exists a declining significance of gender over time; in the United States, a woman working fulltime earned 60 percent of what her male colleague earned in 1960, and earned 77 percent of what he earned in 2009 (Hegewisch and Hartmann). In Canada, women have made even greater gains, with the gap between women’s and men’s wages narrowing to just 17 percent (Zhang, “Can Motherhood”). Research suggests that despite the tendency to use gender to explain this ongoing gap in earnings, the difference in earnings can be better explained by parental status. Economic data

suggest that a significant difference in earnings exists between women with children and women without children across all cohorts and over a woman's entire lifecycle, and those differences persist even thirty years after entering motherhood (Viitanen).

Disagreement exists over the exact amount of wage gap experienced by mothers. Estimates range from less than 10 percent lower wages for mothers (as compared to women with no children) to upwards of 33 percent lower wages for mothers, depending on the country under analysis and the estimating sample (Viitanen). Research on Canadian mothers has demonstrated earnings differences close to 40 percent in the year of childbirth and 30 percent in the first postchildbirth year (Zhang, "Can Motherhood"). Moreover, Xuelin Zhang found that earning difference persisted over a number of postchildbirth years, and "from the second to the ninth postchildbirth years, the annual earnings differences between mothers and the comparison group ranged from 5 percent to 10 percent, with the lower earning penalties occurring in the years farther away after childbirth" ("Can Motherhood" 1678). Similar penalties have been shown in the United States where "mothers appear to alter employment hours, job traits, and tenure in ways similar to fathers (whose wages increase) [yet] mothers experience a substantial wage penalty, whether or not they are married" (Misra and Murray-Close 1286). Much of this research further acknowledges that existing data is often constrained in ways that dampen the true earnings penalties and longer period of earning recovery that most mothers likely encounter (Zhang, "Can Motherhood"). As a result, it is clear that mothers face a pervasive wage penalty.

The wage gap is explicitly tied to childbearing. Joya Misra and Marta Murray-Close found that "While wages among childless men and childless women have been converging, mothers earn substantially less than childless women, while fathers earn somewhat more than childless men" (1286). This was particularly true for white, married men in professional or managerial jobs, whom they show receive the largest fatherhood bonus, and for white women, whom they argue face a larger penalty for motherhood than all other minority groups in the U.S. (1287). Research suggests that mothers are less likely to be hired, are offered lower salaries if they are presented with the job, and are less likely to be evaluated as competent when compared to their childless female counterparts (Correll et al.). Shelley Correll et al. also show that childless women were offered nearly an 8 percent higher salary, and fathers were offered a salary that was 8.6 percent higher than mothers (1333). And finally, mothers are about half as likely as their childless counterparts to even be called back for an interview, which suggests that on a variety of measures, employers tend to see mothers as less desirable employees when compared to childless women and men (with or without children) (Correll et al.).

Motherhood, Poverty, and Social Vulnerability

These data demonstrate that women who become mothers face a set of assumptions that implicitly discount their ability to be both workers and mothers; these assumptions have material consequences for the economic viability of mothers. Motherhood is also costly, both during those first few years of reduced wages and in the subsequent years when those costs continue to compound. The ongoing economic cost of motherhood not only diminishes what a mother is able to earn over her lifetime but also increases her risk of poverty. The “pauperization of motherhood” describes the mechanisms by which parenthood increasingly leaves mothers poorer than fathers (Folbre). In fact, single motherhood is the primary cause of women’s persistently high rate of poverty, particularly in countries like the U.S. where an ineffective welfare state does little to compensate mothers for their unpaid work or to facilitate their employment (Christopher). In the U.S., a family headed by a single female faced a poverty risk of 10 percentage points higher than that of male-headed families without a spouse present (Gradín). Such risks are exacerbated for mothers of color, who are more likely (45 percent) to live in a female-headed family without a spouse present than their white counterparts (20 percent) (Gradín). In Canada, single mothers are 2.33 times as likely as their single-father counterparts to live below the poverty line (Christopher et al.). In all developed countries, single mothers are at least five times as likely as married nonparents to live in poverty, and married parents are significantly more likely than married nonparents to live in poverty (Christopher et al.).

Thus the economic costs mothers incur make them more susceptible to poverty and place them in an ongoing position of social and economic vulnerability. Yet despite the substantial economic data to suggest that women face systemic inequality, there exists the pervasive assumption that most mothers occupy a precarious economic position because of the personal choices that they have made. Many people assume that mothers have chosen to reduce hours and/or work part time, have disrupted their time in the labour force with an extended maternity leave, or have moved from the private sector to the public sector to increase job flexibility. Controlling for these factors does not ameliorate the motherhood wage penalty (Zhang, “Earnings of Women”). In developed countries such as the U.S. and Canada, the motherhood pay gap results in mothers facing a systemic social inequality that cannot be explained by the individual choices that mothers make. Relying on such explanations obscures the structural ways that inequality operates to penalize women who become mothers, and implies that their compromised economic situation is the result of personal choice rather than the consequence of social and economic inequality.

Emblematic of this individualist rationale for mothers' economic plight is the *Lean In* doctrine popularized by Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, in her popular book *Lean In: Women, Work and Will to Lead*. Sandberg encourages women interested to become mothers to focus on the "internal obstacles" (9) that hold them back—a modern-day female Horatio Alger peddling a comforting return to individual responsibility to solve social inequality (60). Such focus reinforces the popular assumption that the motherhood wage penalty results from the individual decisions women make about their reproduction and their employment, and that by "leaning in" women can remedy deeply entrenched patterns of social and economic inequity. The widespread acceptance of this as conventional wisdom has caused motherhood to remain largely invisible within the metrics of social oppression. As a result, motherhood remains subsumed under the larger category of gender inequality, rendering it unseen and largely overlooked as a significant social category in its own right.

Visualizations and the Ideological Limits They Impose

Visualizations impose ideological constraints on our socio-cultural world that have material consequences for how we move through that world (Kelley, "The Emergent," "Urban Experience"). Imagery that collapses the social and economic inequality of motherhood into the larger category of gender renders motherhood invisible. It implies that mothers as a class are not easily recognized as facing oppression as a result of their status as mothers. Within the framework of conventional social justice activism as it is commonly depicted (see Figures D and E), motherhood never appears as an analytic category. Certainly the category "woman" or "female" is a close approximation, since four out of five women will give birth in their lifetime (Livingston and Cohn). But such imprecision means that motherhood does not enter the parlance of our time and does not come to constitute our sociocultural imaginary; mothers are not recognized as oppressed. Thus, motherhood is overlooked as a subjugated status, as a social liability, and as an outsider identity.

If motherhood remains invisible in the imagery used to visualize oppression and inequality, there is little hope for gaining traction to remedy the specific issues facing mothers within the larger project of social justice activism. Graphics such as Figures A through E show up in textbooks, on websites, and in the popular media, and their uniformity normalizes a particular framework for thinking about, talking about, and evaluating social problems. The invisibility of motherhood means that it is rarely featured as a central category within mainstream social justice activism and, indeed, seldom plays a primary role within gender-based activism. Motherhood scholars have observed a striking

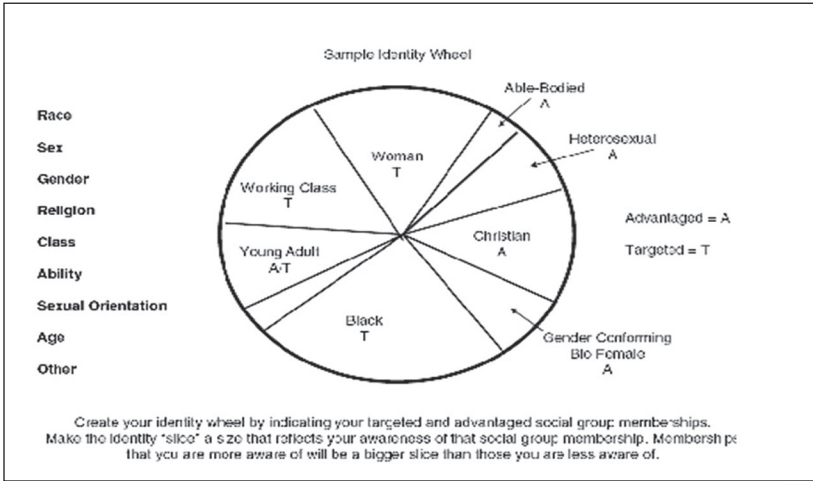


Figure D



Figure E

disconnect between the minimal representation of childbirth and motherhood in feminism and feminist activism, and the more central role that birth and motherhood plays in the actual lives of most women (Rich; Ruddick; Kawash; O'Reilly). Visualizations matter: they shape the way we see the world and how we go about changing it. We cannot expect to address the social and economic inequality facing mothers if we never learn to identify mothers as an oppressed class.

Because we have such little fluency with motherhood as a category of op-

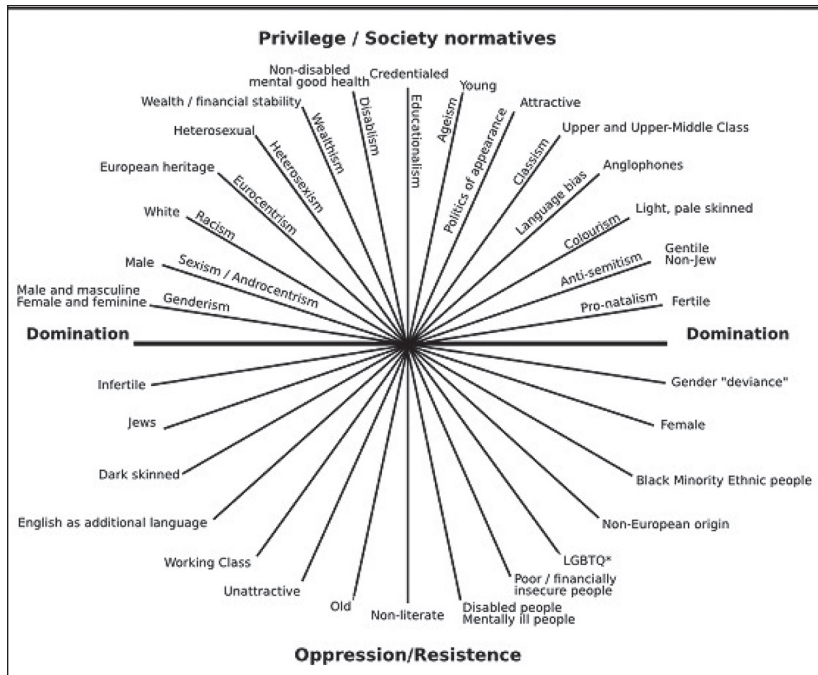


Figure F

pression, we risk mischaracterizing it when it does surface. Figure F depicts yet another popular visualization of privilege–oppression, one in which being fertile is labelled a privilege and being infertile is labelled an oppression. Critiquing this representation is not to dismiss the social sanctions women may incur for not having children (Whiteford and Gonzalez), nor is it to reduce the emotional devastation women may experience with regard to infertility (Cousineau and Domar). Yet the data I present above clearly argues that it is childless women (whether childless by choice or not) who are most likely to enjoy the high economic parity and least likely to slip below the poverty line. Indeed a woman’s fertility does not grant her a privileged status, despite the saccharin depictions of motherhood that permeate our pro-natal society. Instead, a woman’s successful fertility—her status as a mother in western society—exacts a profound social and economic toll that relegates her to a subjugated position, and this remains overlooked precisely because of motherhood’s invisibility in these matrices.

Our averted gaze means that we have little in the way of critical analytic language to discuss the social and economic inequality mothers face: there is no “-ism” for the systemic inequity mothers encounter. Figures G and H offer a linguistic taxonomy of social inequality and include concepts such as

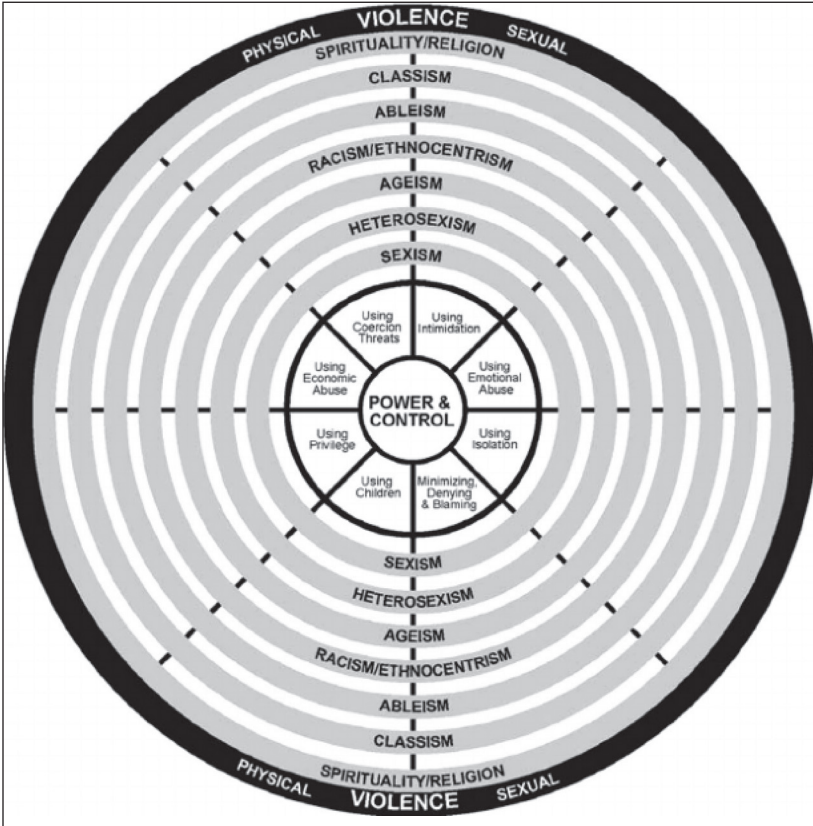


Figure G

racism, sexism, transgender oppression, heterosexism, classism, ableism, religious oppression, ageism/adulthood. This inability to precisely articulate mothers' oppression within the existing taxonomy of oppression further exacerbates the tendency to see motherhood discrimination as an individual problem rather than a social one. And because the central role that motherhood plays in women's social and economic oppression remains largely invisible—motherhood is not understood in terms of intersection theory. Social awareness about how motherhood intersects with other social categories—specifically social class, race, and sexuality—remains low, both in the academy and in the wider public. Such invisibility has caused researchers to ponder why then is maternity not understood to be a subject position and, hence, not theorized as with other subject positions in terms of the intersectionality of gendered oppression and resistance? Why do we not recognize mothers' specific perspectives as we do for other women, whether they are queer, working class, radicalized and so forth? Why do mothers and mothering not count or matter (O'Reilly 6)?

Matrix of Oppression

Social Identity Categories	Privileged Social Groups	Border Social Groups ↔	Targeted Social Groups	Ism
Race	White People	Biracial People (White/Latino, Black, Asian)	Asian, Black, Latino, Native People	Racism
Sex	Bio Men	Transsexual, Intersex People	Bio Women	Sexism
Gender	Gender Conforming Bio Men And Women	Gender Ambiguous Bio Men and Women	Transgender, Genderqueer, Intersex People	Transgender Oppression
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual People	Bisexual People	Lesbians, Gay Men	Heterosexism
Class	Rich, Upper Class People	Middle Class People	Working Class, Poor People	Classism
Ability/Disability	Temporarily Abled-Bodied People	People with Temporary Disabilities	People with Disabilities	Ableism
Religion	Protestants	Roman Catholic (historically)	Jews, Muslims, Hindus	Religious Oppression
Age	Adults	Young Adults	Elders, Young People	Ageism/Adulthood

© Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, Second Edition, Routledge, 2007

Figure H

Making Motherhood Matter

Making motherhood matter is not a mere academic exercise; it has the potential to transform the current social and economic landscape. Social change directed at the social and economic conditions that increase mothers' vulnerability is well within the realm of the possible. We already know that the motherhood pay gap is not inevitable and that "nations differ greatly in how parent-friendly and woman-friendly labor markets and welfare states are, so gender inequality and poverty is much lower in some nations than in others" (Christopher et al. 231). An increase in the visibility of motherhood as a subjugated position would mean that activism around motherhood would be seen to align with other aspects of social justice activism. Activism around poverty may tie campaigns for minimum wage to campaigns for wage equality for mothers and subsidized childcare (Bäckman). Activism addressing racial inequality may incorporate activism around black women's higher rate of maternal mortality (Howell).

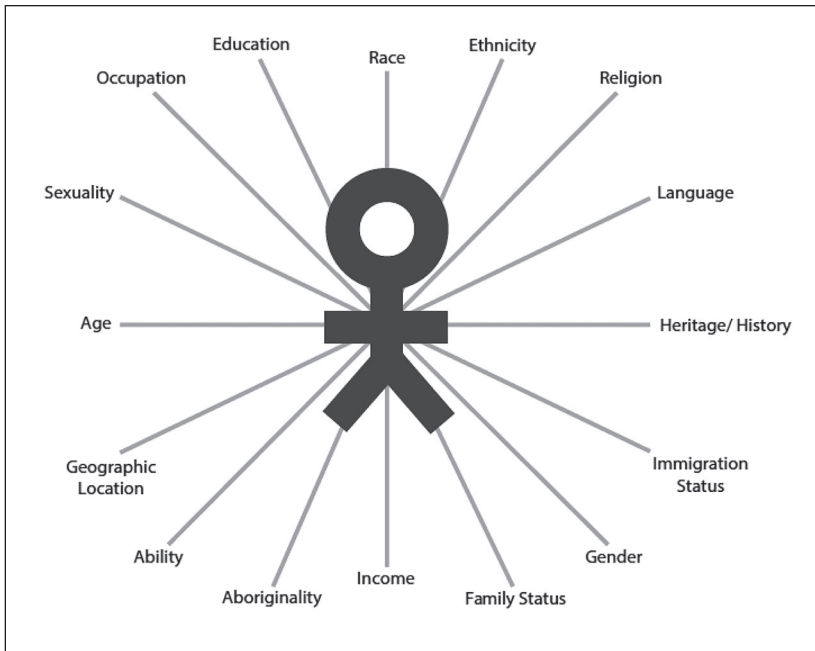


Figure 1

The growing interest in sexuality might fuel feminist inquiry into the ways that pregnancy and childbirth are increasingly sexualized (Jolly, "Sexy Birth"). Motherhood status may one day become a valued category in demonstrating workplace diversity; will companies one day tout the number of mothers who work in their C-suites rather than the number of women who work there? That activism around motherhood has the potential to align with many of the social movements going on today is not surprising. What is surprising is that it largely has not, precisely because motherhood remains invisible as a social category.

When creating a compelling visual, Tiffany Derville Gallicano advises that "It's best to prune data based on the story that you want to tell... That doesn't mean you're spinning something ... it's just that you've chosen which elements of the narrative you're trying to punch up" (17). I have argued here that motherhood is a social category that deserves to be "punched up." Figure 1 depicts the only graphic I was able to find in multiple Google image searches that includes "family status" as an indicator of social privilege or oppression. And while "family status" may still obscure our ability to recognize mothers as an oppressed class (as it may actually refer to marital status or co-habitation), it nonetheless suggests that motherhood has a place at the table.

A focus on motherhood is not meant to reduce women to the reproductive capacity of their bodies, but instead to reveal the central role that mothering

plays in many women's lives (Jolly, "Birthing"). The majority of women will become mothers and, as a result, will face ongoing social and economic consequences that will follow them across their lifespan. Mothers remain invisible within the matrix of oppression, and, thus, motherhood is rarely recognized as a component of social inequity. Visualizing motherhood as a category of social oppression has the potential to sensitize us to not only the inequality that mothers face but also the intersectional nature of motherhood. Because of this, motherhood has the potential to be a rich seam that calls out for fresh scholarly excavation. Motherhood scholars have long mined this terrain, but the time has come for other social justice scholars to join us in the dig.

Endnotes

¹Fig. A graphic from Ferber et al.

²Fig. B graphic from Day of the Girl.

³Fig. C graphic from All Booked Up.

⁴The graphics analyzed throughout this article were those that appeared most frequently during Google image searches for terms such as "intersectional identity" and "intersectional identity privilege."

⁵Fig. D graphic from Andrew Joseph Pegoda.

⁶Fig. E graphic from Erica Stout, AAUW Diversity and Inclusion Tool Kit.

⁷O'Reilly finds that the percentage of motherhood content in women studies conferences, journals, textbooks, and syllabi range from less than 1 percent to just under 4 percent.

⁸Fig. F graphic from <http://unitevamag.com/connect/checking-your-own-privilege/> Adapted from Kathryn Pauly Morgan.

⁹Fig. G graphic from Maurianne Adams.

⁰Fig. H graphic from "Wheels."

¹Fig. I graphic from "Our Research Approach."

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