Attar, Dena. "The Demand that Time Forgot (1992)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 31–36. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:55 UTC.

Copyright © Deborah Cameron, Joan Scanlon and the contributors 2010. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

4. The Demand that Time Forgot (1992)

Dena Attar

On the corners of streets near where I live you can often see groups of women hanging around, toddlers in tow, after they've taken their children to school in the morning. They stand talking for up to half an hour whatever the weather, because there isn't anywhere else to meet and it's better than being alone. Then they go and there is no more sign of the mothers and children shut away behind doors somewhere, isolated. It is easy to forget, with all the current emphasis on mothers returning to work, how many women's lives are still like this.

At the first WLM conference I went to we agreed to have four demands, for equal pay, equal opportunities in work and education, free contraception and abortion on demand, and twenty-four hour nurseries. From then on I was active in all sorts of groups and campaigns — consciousness-raising, women's centres, women's aid, free pregnancy testing, reclaim the night, rape crisis. We made up more demands, then stopped having demands. We won the arguments about equal pay and opportunities but realised there was a lot still holding us back. We found new issues all the time. There was more and more to do but then I had children and started cracking up and stopped going to lots of meetings and being in several groups at once. Now I have to figure out very carefully where the time's coming from.

We were always a bit embarrassed about that demand anyway, even when it was first adopted. We had to keep explaining that we didn't mean that babies and children should be left in the twenty-four hour nurseries all the time. It was just that mothers needed provision to work the hours their jobs required, day or night, and to go to meetings, go out, whatever. Nothing less would really do if we wanted to free mothers to participate as equals in the adult world. The embarrassment was resolved simply enough — we kept it as a demand but left it at that, without groups or campaigns or anything much at all.

I have other embarrassing memories and some that make me very angry. I remember a group meeting where we discussed motherhood, and had decided to interrogate each of the mothers present (they were in the minority) about their reasons

for having had children. They all said it had not been consciously or deliberately chosen. That let them off the hook then. They obviously had the rest of us figured out — that version of events gave them some lever to demand support, whereas any woman confessing she'd deliberately opted to have a child could expect to be left to get on with it. An even more shameful memory is of early experience in free pregnancy testing groups, where we just assumed that every positive result was a disaster. I heard later of one woman wanting a baby who sneaked in alone and used the kit herself so she wouldn't have to face us. We learned eventually and mended our ways.

I first realised how much of a minority mothers were in the WLM at a meeting where a majority vote decided to charge women for using the creche at a new women's centre. Looking around the room I could see exactly why the vote was lost. In fact, most women are mothers. In meetings like that one, most women weren't. Most of them missed the point that their decision meant charging women with children for using a centre which childless women, who are usually more affluent, could use for free. Few mothers had any say in the matter, because few of us were able to be at the meeting.

A couple of years later I went to an open meeting at another women's centre where I knew no-one but hoped to start getting involved. It was a daytime meeting and I had three-year old twins with me. The creche wasn't open. Nobody spoke to me when I arrived. I struggled to keep the children quiet and non-disruptive while the other women got on with the agenda — they spent a long time on details about one worker's maternity leave and replacement. Eventually the effort became too much and as I couldn't follow or take part in the discussion I decided to leave. Nobody spoke to me when I left either — I didn't go back for a long time and I'm still angry.

Strip away the anecdotal detail and this is the picture — feminists have failed to campaign for childcare because mothers, who need it, don't have enough of it to find the time for campaigning, and others, who don't think they need it, don't have the motivation — some are even hostile. The situation I'm describing also coincides with a historical period where the marketplace, not the community or the state, is supposed to provide. Instead of a collective response to the needs of working mothers, there's been a privatised response. The waiting lists for nursery places are still huge while domestic service is once again becoming a significant sector of employment for young women working as nannies, in a reversal that takes us back to the 1930s.

There has been a National Childcare Campaign but it was never an autonomous, feminist campaign. It was a mixed rather than a women's organisation which for a

while lived up to its name and did some campaigning. In the mid-80s the government offered it, amongst other organisations, what seemed a large sum of money to administer for childcare projects outside London. There was a debate; the amount was really tiny in comparison with the need, enough to fund some office expansion and new workers and a few new nursery places around the country. In the end the NCC took the money, the organisation grew (amidst splits and quarrels), and increasingly devoted itself to topics like the pay and conditions of nursery workers (but most of us still didn't have nurseries), the management and running of nurseries it was involved in (but most of us still didn't have nurseries), and virtually stopped campaigning (but most of us still didn't have nurseries). Its offshoots survive, and there is still some piecemeal campaigning for moderate demands, but without much visibility or grassroots support. Of course feminism has attended to the concerns of mothers and children, but what I want to address in the rest of this article is the gaps and silences, the biases.

In her article 'Feminism and motherhood' Ann Oakley critically examines the predominantly negative evaluation of motherhood which was presented by feminists up to the late 1970s. She speculates that the shift in emphasis was connected with whether or not feminists theorising about motherhood were writing from experience, noting that those who were (such as Adrienne Rich) were more positive than those who were not (Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Juliet Mitchell and Kate Millett). She may be right, but I think there were also other shifts for which we need wider explanations.

Shulamith Firestone was unequivocal about the centrality of motherhood, as a role, in the oppression of women when she wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970) 'The heart of woman's oppression is her child-bearing and child-rearing role'. In some ways the revolutionary and radical feminists of the 1970s and 80s took this statement and turned it around, in arguing that we needed a politics of reproduction, the point being that men oppressed women in order to control reproduction, rather than that the way for men to oppress women (for whatever reasons) was through reproduction and motherhood. But other issues took over anyway: the cornerstone of women's oppression was next said to be heterosexuality, or pornography, or violence. I guess there are four corners to my house.

Firestone didn't argue for twenty-four hour nurseries but much more radically against a society which excluded both mothers and children, against the institutions of both motherhood and childhood. *The Dialectic of Sex* is a brilliant book, funny, passionate and very much of its time — the era of anti-Vietnam protests, student uprisings, dropping out. It isn't really about sex or dialectics so much as it's about freedom. The sections on children and mothers are still widely remembered and referred to, although often in a distorted way (notoriously the suggestion that child-bearing could be taken over by technology). The most unusual feature of her analysis is the stress on children's rights — she has considerably more empathy with children than with mothers, although she doesn't distinguish between girls and boys, nor always even between mothers and fathers. Her views on the freedom of ghetto life — kids bringing themselves up — now seem startlingly naive, but at least she did recognise that children too were oppressed, and didn't simply equate their needs with those of adult women.

Firestone influenced my generation of radical feminists far more than I realised at the time. Since there wasn't a handy technological fix, there seemed only two choices. The first was not to have children at all, but the problem with that was if creating the feminist revolution meant not having children, it wasn't clear to some of us why a feminist revolution was in our interests. The second was to construct the complete alternative society within which to raise them. The realisation that we didn't quite have time for this before our own childbearing days ran out started hitting lots of feminists in the 1980s — and then there was trouble.

I have been painfully re-reading articles and letters to get the flavour of those times. Ruth Wallsgrove's 'Thicker than water: mothering and childcare' (ch. 3, this volume) spoke of betrayal — that is, the betrayal of a feminist ideal, or of other feminists, by women who decided to have children and have them now when we hadn't yet achieved the revolution and were going to have to raise them in the

same old ways. These confrontations happened in real life, as well as on paper. Oddly enough, in wanting to know why exactly mothers thought they had to have a different relationship to children from that which other adults could have, feminists kept on forgetting about breastfeeding — or remembered, but set limits so that it wouldn't interfere with a co-parent's equal rights and responsibilities. There were also the feminist voices claiming you really did have to choose — you not only couldn't be a revolutionary, you couldn't be a creative artist and a mother. Alice Walker conceded you could write and be a mother if you only had one child.

Exploring the whole issue of choice was important, and still is; I do not minimise the impact of negative attitudes towards women without children (which to some extent those of us with children have also experienced for part of our adult lives). Taken to extremes, the wholesale querying of biological motherhood as a reasonable choice led to some distinctly anti-woman attitudes, covert or outright hostility towards mothers and children alike. It also served to push aside other questions about choice. Whether or not to have children and the right to choose is not as urgent a question to mothers who already have them, who generally have less money, less time and fewer choices than other women. (The income gap between men and women, for example, is really a gap between men/some women, and mothers).

Meanwhile socialist feminists, less troubled by the personal politics of it all, were analysing reproduction and childcare in relation to production and capitalism. Many were working within trades unions and local government to put childcare on the agenda, trying for what was possible (and therefore not very radical). Liberal feminist mothers worried about conditioning and wrote about how you needed to set up a thoroughly illiberal regime in your own home, censoring children's TV, toys, books and access to the world outside. Radical feminism grew more interested in less mainstream issues: new reproductive technologies, child sexual abuse, lesbian custody cases. From a radical feminist perspective it was always clear that extreme cases grew out of a general situation, but also served to patrol the edges of the mainstream — they kept mothers in line, but also happened because mothers were kept in line. Yet the effect of concentrating on minority experience in this way can also be that mainstream experience ceases to be seen as problematic, and is reconstructed as normal.

The point is not to blame individual women, let alone feminists — there is certainly no point at all in simply leaning on other women to take the personal responsibility for childcare which they may have deliberately decided against for themselves, nor do many of us want our children cared for on that basis. It is much more important to look at the politics of childcare and the politics of motherhood which we have

collectively developed. Most mainstream current discussion is extremely narrow, focused on working mothers, childcare provision for the under-fives and a few allied concerns. It is not only twenty-four hour nurseries which have fallen off the agenda. We've stopped even discussing what we might want, and meanwhile the agenda could just as easily move backwards as forwards. There's always a possibility of a backlash against working mothers, not only in this country, even though for most mothers there is never anything but an illusion of choice. In middle-class sectors of employment, things are supposedly getting easier for working mothers all the time. Meanwhile there are right-wing arguments that better maternity leave will make it too expensive for international capital to employ women here, forcing it to seek out cheaper labour elsewhere in the world where women don't have such costly rights.

A radical agenda for discussion ought to include more than how to get our children taken off our hands — which isn't always what we want. It has to include poverty. It ought to include how mothers are constantly policed, how we have responsibility without social power, but also frighteningly real power. Who do we want to have caring for children when mothers aren't doing it — the state? Men? Other women? We need more honest discussion of choices or alternatives without having to pretend it's all fine.

References

Firestone, Shulamith (1970), *The Dialectic of Sex*, London: Paladin.

Oakley, Ann (1986) 'Feminism and motherhood', in Martin Richards and Paul Light (eds.), *Children of Social Worlds*, Cambridge: Polity Press.