CHAPTER 14

Political Motherhood
and the Feminisation of Citizenship:
Women’s Activisms and the Transformation
of the Public Sphere

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Political Motherhood

Beyond individual rights, citizenship may be grasped as a historically specific embodiment of the legitimate authority of the political community. Struggles over citizenship are thus struggles over the very meaning of politics and membership in a community. Paradoxically, perhaps, it is marginal or non-citizens, those excluded from active participation in the political community, who have had the most impact on citizenship as a historically evolving imaginary. To effect the redefinition of citizenship, non-citizens must first move into the public sphere. Indeed, they have often to redefine what that public sphere is, and its very limits. Hence in this chapter I deploy the private/public distinction as a powerful deconstructive, and yet essential, analytical tool for comprehending ‘motherist’ social movements both as they developed during the early phases of feminism in the Anglo-American West, and as they currently exist in postcolonial nations and in ethnic diasporic communities. My central argument is that women’s active citizenship starts from pre-established cultural domains of female power and rightful ownership or responsibility. These culturally defined domains, or the attack upon them, create the conditions of possibility for women’s civic activism which, in the face of male resistance, comes progressively to challenge authoritarian structures of power, usually controlled by men.

The term ‘political motherhood’ is taken from Jennifer Schirmer’s article on ‘motherist’ movements in Latin America (Schirmer 1993). Distinctively, such movements are always conjunctural: they valorise maternal qualities — caring, compassion, responsibility for the vulnerable — as encompassing and anchored in democratic values. They thus deny dualistic theories of gendered opposition between male and female as embodiments of exclusive qualities. Second, political motherhood is a process of unfolding consciousness, as women progressively move into the public sphere.

Historically, political motherhood challenged, I argue, established notions of civic legitimacy and created the conditions for the feminisation of
citizenship: the reconstitution of citizenship in terms of qualities associated with women’s role as nurturers, carers and protectors of the integrity of the family and its individual members. These qualities came increasingly to be defined as critical to the continued legitimate authority of the political community. Hence the chapter draws on exemplary case studies to show processes of emerging synergy between motherhood and democracy and of women’s radicalisation in the face of male authoritarianism and exclusion.

Perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of the move by women, en masse, from pre-established, culturally defined women’s power bases into the public sphere was the emergence of political motherhood as a large-scale social movement in the nineteenth century, first in England and the United States and later in the Near East and Asia (Jayawardena 1986).

**Political Motherhood and First-Wave Feminism**

The army of female philanthropists who invaded the public sphere in Britain and the US during the nineteenth century could little have imagined that by the end of the twentieth century, their particular concerns – with poverty and deprivation, the protection of children, health and education, as well as human rights, alcoholism or male versus female sexuality – would dominate state budgets and run into hundreds of billions of pounds annually. Nor did most of them, when they initially began their activism, anticipate that it would lead them to join the demand for women’s suffrage. As Prochaska has argued,

> The interest of philanthropic women in female suffrage emerged, not inevitably, but quite naturally out of certain of their activities.... [E]arly female suffrage societies were seen by them as another branch of philanthropy; the means were political but the end philanthropic.... (Prochaska 1980: 227–8)

Quaker women ministers who initially worked for abolitionist causes in the anti-slavery movement reacted to their exclusion from the World Anti-Slavery Conference held in London in 1840 by calling the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 – a convention which, declaring that men and women are created equal, was the beginning of organised American feminism as a social movement (Banks 1981: 22–3). In 1833, 80,000 women in Britain had signed an anti-slavery petition (*ibid.*: 22). Banks argues that attempts to exclude women from public office in the anti-slavery movement, despite their leading role, forced women such as the Grimke sisters

> to defend their behaviour and it led them into a much more self-conscious articulation of women’s rights, which became in time a specific demand for equality between the sexes. (Banks 1981: 22)

Similarly,

> the humiliation of the exclusion [of Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton]
from the convention seems to have deepened the feminist consciousness already developing in both women. (Banks 1981: 23)

This radicalisation of women's demands for legal rights was not limited to rights activists; it arose equally among evangelical women working, in the name of Christian virtue and moral purification, to reform the miseries of prostitution, child labour and the conditions of workhouses, or to advocate temperance as men's duty to their families, and the end to double standards of sexual morality.

Walby proposes, against Banks's critiques of the welfare orientation of much women's activism in the inter-war period, that such women,

while maintaining a theoretical adherence to a division between 'women's sphere' and 'men's sphere,' sought to enlarge what was encompassed by women's sphere. Tasks which were performed by women in the household, such as caring for the sick and raising the young, were argued to fall still in women's sphere when carried out in public institutions outside the household, such as schools and hospitals. This claim ... stretched the notion of separate spheres while not challenging it. (Walby 1990: 167; emphasis added)

Hence the institutions of the welfare state, according to Walby, 'were overwhelmingly led by women' (ibid.).

One of the remarkable features of first-wave feminism, little noted by social historians, is the enormous expansion of a specifically women's print capitalism in the nineteenth century. If, according to Benedict Anderson, print capitalism enabled the imagination of the nation as a community (Anderson 1983), then women's print capitalism, a major feature of the liberal public sphere in Britain and the US in the nineteenth century, reflects the emergence of an imaginary sisterhood and a feminised public sphere. Women published not only women's newspapers and journals, edited by some of the leading feminists of the century, but diaries, biographies and autobiographies, exposes and reform books advocating new welfare policies, political tracts, essays, articles, letters to newspapers and pamphlets. Indeed, these form the basis for most of the historical research on the early emergence of the women's movement (e.g., Prochaska 1980; Eisenstein 1981; Banks 1981; Scott 1996). A parallel development of women's print capitalism occurred in countries beyond the West, such as Egypt, China and India (Jayawardenena 1986: 17–18, 51–2). In 1885 Ellice Hopkins, who founded the White Cross Army of men against prostitution,

addressed meetings of up to 2,000 working men at a time; and she wrote most of the pamphlets which made up the 'White Cross Series,' which sold over two million copies in England and America by the end of the century. One of her effusions, 'True Manliness,' sold 300,000 copies in its year of publication. (Prochaska 1980: 215–16)

It was not just that charitable women ventured beyond the home and familial domestic space, often in the face of male opposition, to assume
public roles and offices in voluntary organisations. Women publicised their
point of view in a multitude of ways, not only spectacular ventures into dens
of iniquity, brothels and pubs, or into the hospices and homes of patients
dying of cholera and other contagious diseases, but also by testifying before
Select Committees of the House of Commons or the House of Lords, by
lobbying and petitioning, by campaigning on a variety of moral causes
through the press, and by publishing the intimate details of their activism and
daily lives in personal novels, diaries and autobiographies. The imagination
of sisterhood and its special (often essentialised) qualities, across classes and
even national boundaries, was a powerful message which men, however
positioned, could not ignore.

The Political Community and the Constitution of Citizenship

The importance of these developments for the feminisation of citizenship
needs to be spelled out. I start from the fact that the legitimacy of the
political community is often grounded discursively in certain human qualities,
regarded as foundational for the constitution of citizenship and the public
sphere, here defined broadly as encompassing both civil society and the state.
In opposing the entrenched privileges of the Church and the aristocracy, the
philosophers of the Enlightenment stressed individual rationality, autonomy
and equality as the central sources of legitimacy for the democratic political
community and its public sphere. Historically, these human qualities came to
be defined as masculine. Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of modernity
has been that the moment of male emancipation was also the moment of
gender reification and exclusion (of course, not all men were emancipated
either). This was nowhere more evident than in France where, as Joan
Wallache Scott has recently demonstrated (Scott 1996), the naturalisation of
male privileges in the name of universal rights sexualised the public/private
divide in almost pornographic terms. Whereas in England and America
attempts were made to confine women to the domestic sphere by con-
structing them as virtuous mothers and carers, in need of protection from a
dangerously sexualised male world, in France women were constructed not
only as irrational but as sexually rapacious and violent. Before the French
revolution,

women were very much a part of the opposition to absolutism, and their activity
took more or less overtly political forms. The salons, run by elite women,
sponsored the discussions that contributed to what became a critical and
dissenting ‘public opinion.’ This public included women but only those of wealth,
education and social grace. (Scott 1996: 31; see also Habermas 1989 on the
evolution of the public sphere)

Women were active in oppositional journalism. Indeed, with the exception
of Rousseau who was strongly anti-feminist (Eisenstein 1981), many of the
French Enlightenment male philosophers such as Montesquieu, Diderot, Voltaire and Condorcet were sympathetic, or actively supported, women’s rights (Banks 1981: 28). Some women, at least, were no longer confined to domestic spaces – so much so that Sombart proposed that one of the defining features of post-Renaissance developments in Europe was the rise in consumption linked to the secularisation of women (Sombart 1967/1913), a change spearheaded by single courtesans attending the court.

By contrast, following the Revolution and its declaration of equality, liberty and fraternity, a rigid separation of the sexes into two spheres became embodied in a sexual imagery,

establishing the physical boundaries of masculine and female bodies. Crossing the threshold from the hearth to the forum led to hermaphroditism, they [men] charged, the loss of distinguishing features of male and female. The danger of androgyny was a sexually indecipherable, hence monstrous, body.... [P]olitical women [were depicted in caricatures] as ugly, comical, funny-looking, masculine imitators.... [W]omen with monocles, cigars and beards; and men in skirts....

[T]ransgression was depicted as castration – as a threat to the sign of men’s difference and the symbol of his power, now equated with political rights ... rested on segregated spaces. (Scott 1996: 80-1)

At the end of the nineteenth century, women for French thinkers such as Le Bon became a metonym for the crowd, the loss of self, the unconscious, the emotionally shallow, lacking in creativity (ibid.: 131–3). They were constructed as violent furies or superstitious handmaidens of priests (ibid.: 101–2). Emile Durkheim used morphological evidence to argue that ‘women evolved through civilisation to have smaller brains than in primitive societies’ (ibid.: 96). All these qualities excluded women, naturally and essentially, from active citizenship in the public sphere.

Of course, France was a democracy only intermittently and partially in the years following the Revolution, and women suffered badly under repressive and authoritarian regimes. The law of 28 July 1848, for example, excluded women from participation in clubs, whether as observers or members (ibid.: 77). This was at a time, it should be noted, when Anglo-American women’s philanthropy was reaching new heights, with hundreds of thousands of women participating in organised charitable works or mobilising for political rights campaigns. In the very year of the Seneca Falls Convention, the Constituent Assembly in France agreed that women must be barred from political activity (ibid.: 64). Violent attacks on female meetings were condoned (ibid.: 81). The French government undertook welfare reform top-down. All this meant that a fully fledged women’s movement never developed in France. Women finally got the vote in 1944. Yet in the USA, too, the process of democratisation, of full adult emancipation, was only achieved in the late 1960s, following the civil rights movement.

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that leading French feminists from the very beginning stressed their ‘difference’ as legitimising
analysis of gender relations cannot assume the boundary between private and public as given. (Yuval-Davis 1997: 5–6)

It is sometimes necessary to hold on to a distinction while continually questioning its very possibility. This strategy, of writing against the grain from within a discourse (or ‘reading’, see Spivak 1987, Chapter 12), displaces discursive certainties by highlighting the instability and multivocality of conceptual distinctions, and revealing the implicit ideological baggage they carry. In line with this, recent feminist philosophers draw on Habermasian discourse ethics to argue against any substantive division between the private and public spheres. The point is elegantly put by Seyla Benhabib in a re-evaluation of Hannah Arendt’s thought and of overly juridical or static liberal theorisations of citizenship (Benhabib 1992, Chapter 3). Benhabib defines the public sphere as, very broadly, a political space of discursivity in which contested issues are addressed. It is a permeable arena continuously responsive to new issues, moral challenges and new modes of discourse. Feminism as a social movement and mode of active citizenship has forced certain issues, such as familial power imbalances, into the public sphere. While recognising the basically liberal framework which allows discourse to flourish, Benhabib argues against a topographical or spatial definition of the division between public and private. Any site, however unlikely, can become a site of discourse, and hence part of the public sphere. Moreover, against the liberal view that sees the constitutional framework as basically fixed, she argues that even procedural and constitutional frameworks are open to ethical scrutiny and moral debate.

Benhabib’s work points to the fact that the public sphere is a complex and stratified political space, only partially and sometimes implicitly oriented towards the state and state policies. This is particularly evident in motherist movements which often start from very local concerns, and expand their vision and sphere of publicity in the context of a broadening struggle.

In coining the term political motherhood, Jennifer Schirmer highlights the ability of ‘motherist’ movements in Latin America not only to break into the public sphere, but to create transnational links beyond the nation-state. Motherist movements in Latin America are united in FEDEFAM, the Organisation of Latin American countries for Relatives of the Disappeared, one of the most powerful indigenous transnational networks and human rights lobbies in the world (Schirmer 1993). FEDEFAM includes 17 countries and has support groups throughout the West carrying out fund raising and acting as political watchdogs for human rights abuses (Stephen 1995: 814). Schirmer shows that the organisers of the movement began as mothers whose maternal role as protectors of their homes and family had been violated, and who sought restitution from the state. As the women moved into public political activism, however, they became targets of state violence: they were jailed, kidnapped, raped and tortured; their headquarters were
bombed and their lives threatened. Many of the women started in Christian groups espousing liberation theology, a holistic ideology which promotes both economic well-being and political equality and freedom. Hence, Schirmer argues, the political consciousness which the women developed was transformed in action, to encompass many different dimensions of their activism, some of which could be defined as 'feminist' (campaigns against rape, domestic violence, the struggle for equal rights in the home and in the public sphere), some as economically pragmatic or class-oriented (such as women's education) and some as universalist (such as fighting for human rights alongside men).

Importantly, the women, Schirmer argues, rejected radical Western feminisms that start from sharp gender oppositions, even while they recognised that militarism and state terror were forms of domination and torture perpetrated by (some) men. She thus rejects the evolutionary distinction posed by feminist scholars such as Kaplan (1982) and Molyneux (1985) between 'female' consciousness (practical and traditional) and 'feminist' consciousness (radical and strategic), with its implication that the latter is more 'advanced' than the former (ibid.: 60). Instead she proposes that women's consciousness is contingent and contextual, arising from the articulations of different dimensions of their activism and their long-term ideals and goals. Women's collective experience, in other words, evolves through and in action, determining the specificity of their feminism (see also Radcliffe and Westwood 1996).

Moreover, feminist consciousness responds to the broader national and civil context in which the battle for women's specific citizenship rights takes place. As others, too, have argued (e.g., Johnson-Odim 1991: 315, 321; Basu 1995), in the face of poverty, underdevelopment and severe abuses of human rights, women outside Western democracies have been able, despite the multiple oppressions they suffer, to transcend their narrow interests as women and work for wider and more complex causes, creating alliances by drawing upon all their multiple identities: as mothers, wives, democrats, peasants, workers and patriots, as well as women united in a global sisterhood. During the colonial era, women mobilised against specific cultural practices that were particularly oppressive: polygamy, child marriage, widow burning, feet binding or female seclusion, while fighting for the right to property, education and divorce, much like their counterparts in the West (Jayawardena 1986). Indeed, extensive networks of women activists between Asia, the Middle East and the West developed during the nineteenth century. Asian and Middle Eastern women were influenced by missionary women and theosophists while, simultaneously, they also joined the anti-colonial and independence movements (ibid.: 20–1, 91). They fought with and against colonialism. Mahatma Gandhi, in his espousal of non-violent resistance, developed his own version of political motherhood, exhorting women to 'extend their hearts and interests beyond the narrow confines of their
homes' and arguing that the principle of 'non-violence' (abimsha) and political non-violent resistance were suited to women by nature, that women's courage and self-sacrifice were superior to men's and that, as one women's journal put it,

Because the qualities which this new form of warfare is displaying are feminine rather than masculine, we may look on this life and death struggle of India to be free as a women's war. (Everett 1979: 76, cited in Jayawardena 1986: 97, who also cites Mics 1980: 125, and Mazumdar 1976: 56, 59)

Following independence, women's organisations in postcolonial nations have differed, however, in the extent to which they have chosen to work for specifically women's interests or understood these to be embedded in broader struggles. In Pakistan during the Zia military rule period, for example, the Women's Action Forum, an urban middle-class organisation of academics and professional women, chose to focus exclusively on combating the regime's Islamicisation programme. The women channelled their energies to fight the proposed introduction of radically discriminatory laws against women in the name of Islam. WAF judged that political parties and organisations in the past had failed to come to grips with specifically feminist issues and had often abandoned women once their struggles were won. Reflecting critically on this choice, however, leaders of the movement recognised that

Where the initiative has been taken by either peasant or working class women in Pakistan, the issues have notably not been feminist in content. At grass roots, women have acted to save their homes and villages from landlord terrorism, to destroy narcotics dens or to demand justice in criminal cases. (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987: 151)

By contrast to WAF, in Bangladesh during the same period, women's organisations broadened their alliances. In the face of police intervention and threats, they decided to join forces with the wider movement for democracy rather than focusing exclusively on women's issues. Jahan cites the secretary of one organisation which had successfully spearheaded an anti-dowry signature campaign that collected seventeen thousand signatures:

I became convinced that authoritarian governments will never let us have the space necessary for effective social action. Therefore, joining the movement for democratization seemed as important as running the campaign for violence against women. (cited in Jahan 1995: 100)

The organisation nevertheless continued its vigorous campaign against gender violence (ibid.).

In connecting different struggles, women reach towards a feminist consciousness rooted in particular places at particular historical junctures (Schirmer 1993: 61). Under military rule or dictatorship, such as Palestine under Israeli occupation (see Mayer 1994; Jad 1995), women have had to
battle in public for human and democratic rights in the name of incarcerated or 'disappeared' husbands, lovers, sons or brothers, and to create alliances across national boundaries, an issue I will return to below.

The need is thus to avoid 'dualistic theories' which posit an inescapable opposition between men and women (Stephen 1995: 824; on such dualisms see, for example, Eisenstein 1981). Third World women sometimes reject the label 'feminism' because it opens them up to the accusation of being Western sellouts (Charles and Hintjens 1998: 20). Reflecting on the possible reasons why 'feminism' is rejected by so many Third World women activists, Basu suggests that

Resistance to feminism may reflect a fear that it demands a total transformation of the social order. A popular rendition of this anxiety is the notion that feminists are 'man haters.'... Contrast this notion of feminism with the possibility, aired in more than one chapter of this book, that feminism may be an incremental, hidden form of subversion enacted to protect families and communities, rather than undermine them. (Basu 1995: 7, emphasis added)

While women's resistance takes multifarious forms, some of them hidden, political motherhood is, by definition, overt; a move into the public domain which challenges the confinement of women to domesticity. As such it necessarily transforms the social order without undermining it. Motherist movements advocate defence of the integrity of family and the autonomy of persons within its ambit of responsibility, and stress the centrality of values associated with motherhood for shaping the wider order of the political community. They work for women's causes while advocating a transcendent world view.

The ability of women to work for, and at the same time transcend, their shared sisterhood derives, Stephen suggests, from a more unitary vision: the women activists in COMADRES whom she interviewed did not perceive themselves simply as opposed to their husbands and sons, but rather as key actors in the family which they grasped organically as a primary source of identity, a corporate unit to be defended and protected, and especially so because their husbands, fathers or sons were absent or subject to state terror (Stephen 1995).

Women's activism defies the imaginary which regards women as the vulnerable objects of male protection (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Yuval-Davis 1993), or of the 'nation' as a woman to be protected from external violence. In another kind of symbolic analogy, the nation is imaged as an expanded 'family' and it is the task of men to defend its women and children. Both imaginaries – that of woman as 'the nation' and that of the nation as an extended 'family' – are rooted in traditional notions of male honour and shame. But, as we have seen, this very same imagery can be subverted to stress women's superior moral qualities: evangelical women's movements in nineteenth-century England and America invoked the nation as a family in
which women and men play a complementary, but equal, civic and public role.

**The Passionate Dimensions of Citizenship**

There is constant leakage between the passions of nationalism and the moral sentiments constituting human rights and the rights of citizenship. Women’s peace movements have attempted to reconstitute citizenship in terms of sentiments of motherhood, justice and compassion. In an early article on the women’s peace movement in Israel (Gabriel 1992), Ayala Gabriel-Emmett considers emotions as political forces, as discourses which are located in social relations, and as an ethos which combines ethics and emotions. Contemporary Israeli politics *vis-a-vis* the Palestinians is, she proposes, a ‘politics of collective vulnerability’; that is, a politics in which the different political actors all perceive themselves as victims of past suffering. They transcend the memories of this collective suffering by giving vent to different kinds of collective emotions – grief and rage – as expressions of mourning and revenge. Hence, she argues, national vulnerabilities are ‘rooted in Jewish and Arab ancient histories, in past glories and distant defeats’. The vigil held every Friday in towns and cities throughout Israel by Women in Black, an Israeli–Palestinian women’s peace organisation, and the aggressive opposition to it, ‘unveil’, she claims, ‘the articulation of grief and rage in contesting perceptions of transcending collective vulnerabilities’. The opposition between these two collective emotions represents an opposition between two opposed world views, two opposed visions of the future, and two opposed ethics of political action.

In addition to national vulnerabilities, the vigils also express gender vulnerabilities. Through the vigil Israeli women demand the right not be marginalised. Paradoxically, because they are not combatants in the Israeli army, it is easier for them to reach out to Palestinians. This brings about an intersection or articulation between the politics of gender and the politics of peace.

The politics of gender, Emmett tells us, are a subtext of the vigil, which is explicitly about the occupation of Palestinian lands conquered in the 1967 Six Day War. Through the vigil the women transform political powerlessness into the power of mediation in the peace process. Mothers, sisters or wives, they demonstrate not merely as protected and vulnerable dependants but as protectors. They appeal to Jewish traditions of mourning; they mourn and grieve for the losses of both sides – Israeli and Palestinian. They refer to the Jewish saying that the loss of one human life equals the whole world. They evoke the Jewish image of the mother of Zion, that is, of the nation who mourns for the whole collectivity, for Zion. Hence, they reconstruct grief as autonomous, as not linked to rage and future revenge. They demand that the cycle of death, mourning and revenge be broken. They do this by dislocating
nationalism, by creating a transnational women’s community which cuts across nationalism. They transnationalise and universalise grief and mourning, the experiences of being a mother and a wife, and of losing fathers, husbands and sons in an endless cycle of war, rage and revenge. Their demonstration underlines internal political divisions and cross-cutting boundaries within Israeli society.

In her more recent book, *Our Sisters’ Promised Land: Women, Politics and Israeli–Palestinian Coexistence* (1996), Emmett extends her narrative historically and puts Women in Black in the wider context of Israeli and Palestinian peace and women’s movements. Historically, what is interesting is that a projected image from the margins, of mourning women protesting against atrocities perpetrated by men, has been widely exported and internationalised. There have been Women in Black vigils in Belgrade during the Bosnian war, and in various other European cities. As I show below, diasporic Pakistani women in England organised a Women in Black march to protest against atrocities in Bosnia and Kashmir. Unlike the broader Israeli peace movement, Women in Black are concerned not just with a settlement of the Israel–Palestinian dispute, but with justice – a real end to the occupation and all the atrocities associated with it.

Emmett demonstrates the difficulties women’s groups face in uniting for peace and suppressing other divisions. There are divisions, for example, between Western European Jewish women, who dominate the peace movement, and Jewish women from Middle Eastern countries (*Mizrahi*) who refuse to join, claiming themselves to be marginalised and orientalised, constructed as ‘uncivilised’ or lacking ‘culture’. So, too, there are divisions between secular and religious women peace activists. The religious activists accuse the secular of holding most events on Saturday, and of lacking roots in Jewish tradition. These religious women are fighting for a different interpretation of the biblical text from that suggested by religious extremists and settler zealots; one that stresses the memory of slavery in Egypt, and the injunction to respect strangers in memory of that experience. Finally, there are divisions between Jews and Palestinian Israelis who suffer racism and discrimination within Israel, and Palestinians on the West Bank. These difficulties are greatest when atrocities occur, as when 21 Palestinians were massacred in the Mosque of Al Aqsa and hundreds wounded, this being followed by revenge killings of Jews. At such times, it is particularly hard to sustain alliances across the Palestinian–Israeli divide.

Another division in the Israeli women’s peace movement is between organisations which combine political motherhood, peace politics and feminism, such as Women in Black, and members of women’s organisations who attempt to influence the peace process as mothers, without calling themselves feminists. Writing about such movements in Israel, Yael Azmon (1997) stresses the significance of their entry into the public arena (1997: 110). Drawing on Benhabib’s theorisation of the plural public sphere as a site
of discursive ethics, she argues that the very movement of women peace activists into the public sphere has led them to universalise maternal sentiments, from protecting particular children to protecting any child. Azmon describes how women who started off as passive citizens embarked on a process of discovery and information gathering through which they learnt to mobilise the media on their side and to organise spectacular letter-writing campaigns, to publish articles, lobby government ministries, and petition army commanders. Both movements described by Azmon, although dominated by women, called themselves parents’ organisations, thus avoiding the risk of being branded radical feminist and losing support in the wider public. She analyses the way the aporias of war create contradictory universal and ‘tribal’ discourses, even among ethically concerned parents.

Despite their non-feminist agendas and their adoption of ‘masculine’ modes of persuasive political action, the movements did in the end transform gendered ideas dominant in the political community, legitimising the right to protest even during times of war, and the right of women, as parents equal with men, to participate in the national debate about war.

Hence, just as in Victorian England slavery, exclusion and immiseration brought about by capitalism impelled women into the public domain, so too developments in and beyond the West in the second half of the twentieth century have impelled women into new forms of activism. The collapse of the protective shield around women and children, and their growing vulnerability to capitalist exploitation, civil war and state terror in many postcolonial nations have forced women to act in their own interests, appealing for support from beyond state boundaries, or, in the case of Western or diasporic women’s organisations, mobilising to support vulnerable women and children suffering deprivation or oppression elsewhere in the world or in a mythical or real homeland. In the next section I examine this movement towards autonomous activism through a detailed discussion of the specific case study of diasporic Pakistani women in a British city.

**Diasporic Women and Transnational Citizenship**

The case study, based on ongoing research during the 1990s in Manchester, examines the battle of diasporic Pakistani women for the right to act and speak in the diasporic public domain in Britain (see also Webner 1998). Their emergent activism signalled the radical transformation during the 1990s of this political arena, during which the authority of Pakistani male elders and their monopoly of communal public space, of the right to fund-raise, demonstrate and meet British and Pakistani state representatives, was openly contested by women. The clash has to be understood as a clash of discourses, of legitimised ideologies and of postcolonial cultural worlds around the central issue of the position of women in Islam. It also highlights the way an emergent transnational Muslim consciousness is changing the face
of British Muslim diasporic politics. I argue that critical to the empowerment of Pakistani women in Britain has been the creation of autonomous women's public arenas, while their ability, despite being a marginal group (women) within a marginal group (Muslim immigrant settlers) to reach out with relative ease to high-ranking British politicians underlines certain general features of contemporary British politics.

This reaching out became evident in a series of meetings. During the first week of February 1994, members of the Al-Masoom Trust, a Pakistani women’s organisation in Manchester, met with three British Members of Parliament in quick succession. The meetings, it has to be stressed, were unprecedented; they were a first for members of the Al-Masoom Trust and a first official meeting between British MPs in Manchester and representatives of a women’s organisation in the city.

To understand the significance of these meetings and of the narratives articulated in them requires an understanding of past political struggles in the Manchester Pakistani diasporic public sphere. We need from the start to recognise, however, that we are dealing with a moment of transition, a moment in which, in Ricoeur's terms, a new 'text' is performed, a moment of history in the making (Ricoeur 1981).

By the time of the meeting with the third MP the story of Al-Masoom, the moral narrative of its collective identity, its representational reality, had been established. Mrs Khan, the president and leader of the association, rehearsed and perfected her tale from one encounter to the next. The centrepiece of the narrative was a heroic tale of courage and sacrifice. The women had twice undertaken the arduous and risky journey overland from England through Europe to the border of Bosnia, bringing medical supplies, food, clothing, bedding, toys and even an ambulance to the refugee camps on the outskirts of Zagreb. This heroic narrative, retold anew in every encounter with each new MP, was not simply verbal – it was an embodied narrative. It was objectified by the women themselves who gathered around the MPs in Mrs Khan’s living room, all of them elegantly dressed in splendid shalwar qamiz outfits, the founding members of the older generation seated alongside the ‘youth wing’. It was objectified by the large room packed with goods ready to be sent on the next trip to Bosnia: crates of clothing, sacks of rice, large tins of ghee piled high, individually wrapped and sealed parcels of clothing and toys, each to be given away as a gift parcel for eid to a refugee child. The parcels had been prepared by the women with loving care. Embodying the heroic tale was also the picture album which proved the reality of earlier trips to Bosnia. There were pictures of the refugee camps, of the children and women crowded around the Al-Masoom workers who had braved the icy cold weather and risked their lives for the sake of their beleaguered Muslim sisters and their children.

The women had prepared certain demands to make to the MPs: they wanted the issue of Kashmir raised in Parliament, and they wanted if possible
permission to send a delegation from their organisation to Kashmir. They
wanted the local council to allocate them premises from which to work. Mrs
Khan’s house was their current base – the front room stacked high with the
contributions to Bosnia or Pakistan, the cupboards bursting with electrical
goods given as part of ‘dowries’ (personal trousseaux) to poor young Paki-
stinian brides. Every few months the organisation sends a container to Pakistan
packed with these trousseaux. Each includes a jewellery set, an electrical
good, several outfits, shoes and a bag. These are distributed in Pakistan.

To the critical anthropologist, certain dimensions of this encounter are
evident: the women are relatively affluent and the meeting is a symbolic one:
the three MPs, official representatives of Her Majesty the Queen, are
legitimising by their very presence the right of Al-Masoom to exist. But
whereas the first observation, in recognising the class origins of the women,
seems to deny their representativeness, the second observation problematises
that sociological evaluation by raising the possibility that the women are, in
fact, representative in a critically important sense: they are agents of change
in a gendered war of positions. The women have been accused by male
members of the Pakistani community in Manchester of all manner of cheating
and chicanery. It has been said that they confiscate funds supposedly raised
for charity; that, despite their claims, they never did go to Bosnia; that Mrs
Khan, their leader, is merely masquerading as a philanthropist working for
the common good.

At stake, in other words, is the right of diasporic Pakistani women to act
and speak in the public domain in Britain, and particularly in its diasporic
public sphere. Pakistani women traditionally control costly ceremonial gift
exchanges between families and manage most of the celebrations ‘for
happiness’ associated with rites of passage, and especially weddings. Their
authority thus extends from the domestic and familial to the inter-domestic
domain (Werbner 1990). In claiming a legitimate place in the public sphere,
women have used their position as wives, mothers and guardians of family
and domestic life, embedded in a female world of popular culture and gift
exchange, to create a space of solidarity and a discourse of legitimation. In
doing so they have had to overcome the contradiction between their
perceived role as living embodiments of a threatened Islamic authenticity –
of traditional values under attack from external colonial and postcolonial
forces and ideas – and their desire to act as modern subjects (see also Badran
1991: 207). In this latter struggle they deploy precisely the modernist ideas
and modes of action which their role as symbolic embodiments of ‘tradition’
denies. The result of this aporia has been the discursive production by
women in the Muslim world of a wide range of intersecting and often incon-
sistent discourses. These range from an Islamist feminism which advocates
strict veiling and separation, and yet at the same time espouses feminist
public activism against the secular state (see Göle 1996) to a strong secular
women’s anti-fundamentalist movement. In between these extremes is a
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liberal modernist Islamic discourse, represented, for example, by the work of Fatima Mernissi, who, like the Islamists, goes back to the early Islamic sources but does so in order to prove the liberal message of Islam which is denied by the Islamists.

Running like a thread through these different, contradictory and cross-cutting discursive formations is a singular slogan and (in the Sunni world) a single exemplary figure. The slogan is that Islam accords equal (if according to some, complementary) rights to men and women. The exemplary figure is that of Ayesha, the Prophet’s young wife who outlived him by some 40–50 years and was, at one time, the commander of an Islamic army in its battle with a dissenting Islamic faction. Ayesha is known for her boldness and her wisdom – she is a source of many of the authentic traditions (hadith) about the Prophet’s life and his sayings – and also for her courage and independence. She never remarried and hence lived her whole adult life as an authoritative actor in her own right.

Al-Masoom started its life as just another philanthropic organisation. The trust was motivated by the Islamic notion of kbidmat and suadaqa – selfless communal work and charitable giving. As part of its activities it collected clothing to be distributed to the poor in Pakistan. These were sent in containers and distributed there personally by Mrs Khan or the voluntary workers of a Pakistani-based trust in Rawalpindi. She explained:

Our ambition is to help the truly poor, the street boys and girls left behind, abandoned. We collect money and clothes to give to people who have never been given anything, dowries for girls whom no-one knows are there. We have an organisation in Rawalpindi. I myself go there – I sit in villages with the very poor, I live with them. We collect clothing from various parts of Britain through our networks of friends.

Al-Masoom represents one very familiar narrative in the array of Muslim discourses – a syncretic Muslim feminism which does not deny the traditional role of women as mothers and wives, but nevertheless demands the safeguarding of women’s rights along with a demand for equal rights of participation in the national arena and the public sphere. This particular discursive strand has, both in South Asia and in the Middle East, been the platform of primarily urban middle-class women who enjoy all the privileges of their class. Their positioning in the elite has led one critic, Ayesha Jalal, to attack their lack of radicalism, and to argue that they collude de facto in their own disempowerment, even though, as she also recognises, these elite urban women have been in the forefront of struggles for women’s familial rights and for the right to greater participation in the public sphere (Jalal 1991).

Mrs Khan has built up a circle of devoted women voluntary workers. Most of them come from urban middle-class professional or small-business backgrounds in Britain or Pakistan, in which noblesse oblige (that is, kbidmat in
Urdu) with its associated philanthropic work for the poor is an established tradition (see Caplan 1985).

Why has Al-Masoom emerged at this historical conjuncture? The reasons for this appear to be both local and global. The rise of political Islam worldwide has been associated in Britain with the formation of young women's associations. One attraction of such groups appears to be that they draw on Islam to support legitimised resistance to traditional parental authority and mores (see Lyon 1995). In effect, a return to a pristine Islam has desacralised 'custom' and 'culture', and has thus opened up a whole new discursive space for women to define their rights vis-à-vis men as well as their parents. Within this new discourse, the subordination of women is constructed by them as merely a further instantiation of male ignorance of the real and true tenets of Islam. The struggle is around the meaning of Islam and what constitutes religious authenticity. Such a struggle can be conceived of as a struggle for the control of symbolic space, voice and identity (Werbner 1996; on symbolic space see Bourdieu 1985).

The need to legitimise their activities and hence their very presence in the diasporic public sphere has pushed Al-Masoom to perform increasingly spectacular acts of mobilisation and to reach out beyond the community to the legitimate representatives of the British state. Perhaps the most spectacular capturing of public space so far has been the coordination by Al-Masoom of a Women in Black march through the city streets to protest against the continuing violence in Kashmir and Bosnia. The women who participated came from several different women's organisations in the city. Dressed in black, their heads covered with thick black scarves, the women marched through the streets of Manchester, from its immigrant commercial centre some three miles to the Town Hall, shouting slogans such as STOP THE RAPE IN KASHMIR and STOP THE TORTURING OF WOMEN IN BOSNIA, their banners in Urdu and English advertising their organisations and the reason for the procession. At the Town Hall the women were welcomed by the Lord Mayor of Manchester. Gerald Kaufman, MP, joined them midway through the march and addressed them outside the Town Hall.

This march, like the trip to Bosnia, points to another kind of reaching out – the reaching out beyond the specifically national diaspora of Pakistanis, to beleaguered Muslims everywhere. This transnational consciousness, the very real and immediate awareness of the global predicaments of Muslims, is also a feature of Pakistani male politics and the politics of the mosque.

What has been striking about the transformation in the status of Al-Masoom is the naturalness with which the community has shifted from a male-dominated diasporic public sphere to a gendered public sphere. While some leaders and groups were still questioning the legitimacy of the organisation, most others were already allocating space for women's organisations in their communal ceremonies and celebrations as a matter of course. No longer rejected by the business community, the diasporic public
space came to be reconstructed, at the height of Al-Masoom's activism, by homology to the private, familial space, as a gendered space. During ceremonials and public meetings, the women sat in groups and had their own spokes-
persons.

In order to mobilise support, women drew on their multiple identities — as Punjabis, with a tradition of dance, music, laughter and popular drama; as Pakistani nationalists, raising funds for welfare projects and good works in Pakistan and meeting with Pakistani dignitaries and politicians; as Muslims who identify with the plight of fellow Muslims in Bosnia or Kashmir, mobilise substantial donations for refugees and demonstrate against the atrocities suffered by women and children; and finally, as British subjects who demand equality and reject the aggressive male Pakistani style of politics of the diasporic public sphere.

The ability of ordinary citizens in Britain to make contact with the top echelons of the political leadership is a feature of the British constituency system which expects MPs to bear personal responsibility for the welfare of their constituents. Arguably, the success of Al-Masoom reveals the way Muslim feminist emancipatory politics are facilitated in Britain by the relative openness and pluralism of civil society. In this context, there is no closure of ethnic minority communities. They cannot speak with a single monolithic voice. Their subjectivities — and hence subject positions — are multiple: Pakistani women can align with other women, they can appeal to liberal journalists, to humanitarian activists, to people concerned about human rights. So too Muslim socialists reach out to other socialists, Muslim democrats to other democrats. The political imaginaries of diaspora are thus multiple and the aspirations of diaspora Muslims diverse and often con-
flctual.²

The women of Al-Masoom did not ask for money from the British state. On the contrary, they demanded that fellow Pakistanis donate money to Islamic transnational causes. By avoiding the kind of dependence politics in which many ethnic organisations are enmeshed, they succeeded in capturing the moral high ground and thus opened up a space for women as equal actors in the public domain. Nevertheless, their public status remained precarious. They occupied the boundary zone where Islam, nationalism, feminist activism and popular culture meet; but whereas their political voice could ring out loud and clear, their femininity and sexuality remained closely guarded. Their celebrations and parties, in which the women danced sensuously, expressed their sexuality and joked and clowned, satirising men and celebrating romantic love, were closed to men. Yet it is precisely this conjuncture of the popular and the religious, the patriotic, feminist and humanitarian, the civic and the private, which has enabled the women to forge their own distinctive Muslim political imaginary of maternal and feminine — as well as feminist — politics.
Conclusion: the Power of Political Motherhood

Philanthropic women’s organisations and motherist movements are often mocked as being collusive in the perpetuation of capitalism and patriarchal oppression. Such a view denies the impact such movements can have on the state and its legal system. Although often espousing piecemeal reform rather than revolution, historically the impact of political motherhood both on women’s consciousness and on the law has been, cumulatively, quite revolutionary. Many welfare-oriented reforms in Victorian England preceded women’s suffrage: the Children’s Act, the age of consent, licensing rules, access to education, married women’s right to own property, to divorce and to child guardianship, work laws, maternity allowances, and a host of other legal reforms.3 Women have been in the forefront of peace and democratisation movements. This chapter has spelled out some of the synergies between the fight for suffrage or democracy and the struggle for social and civic rights. In some of the cases presented here, women have been concerned with the plight of impoverished or violated others. In other cases, the attack on women’s own immediate families created the basis for a wider solidarity. Either way, women translated their compassion into ideological agendas articulated in the public sphere.

In general it may be said, as far as women’s citizenship is concerned, that the battle for social citizenship has complemented and reinforced the battle for political and civic rights rather than succeeded it. This has led Walby to critique Marshall’s evolutionary model of citizenship rights (from civic to political to social) for ignoring women’s and minorities’ tortuous route to full citizenship (Walby 1994). The circuitousness of this passage is even truer of the postcolonial world in which women have often had to struggle alongside men for fundamental national, democratic and economic rights, and against them on issues of family violence and economic exploitation. Above all, they have had to fight everywhere to gain a legitimate and authoritative voice in the political community and its public sphere, and to sustain it, once democracy is restored (see Jaquette 1994 and Vargas and Olea, in Chapter 15 of this volume, on this challenge in Latin America).

It is impossible, I have suggested, to separate women’s struggle on behalf of oppressed others, immiserated by poverty, illness or hunger, or on behalf of their own families, husbands, fathers and sons, from women’s ‘rights’ struggle for human rights, individual equality and personal liberty. Writing about Turkish women and the rise of a feminist Islamism, Nilüfer Göle evokes Toqueville’s view that

Democracy is fuelled by the ‘passion for equality’ … rather than by the phenomenon of equality. In other words, society aims to transcend and change itself depending upon egalitarian utopias. (Göle 1996: 52)

So too, Chantal Mouffe cites Toqueville to argue that
Once begun, the democratic revolution has had, necessarily, to undermine all forms of power and domination, wherever they might be. (Mouffe 1988)

Benedict Anderson writes about the independence movements in the Americas that they became as soon as they were printed about, 'concepts', 'models' and indeed 'blueprints' which ultimately challenged entrenched institutions, such as slavery, even if this was not the original intent of the Creole nationalists (Anderson 1983: 81, see also 80, 49).

The power of motherist peace or philanthropic movements is, first, that the women who lead them capture the moral high ground by virtue of their public display of compassion, generosity and a sense of justice. Second, their mixed agendas and embeddedness in local traditions enable them to mobilise ordinary women on a vast scale. Third, they attain a measure of autonomy and influence through their fund-raising activities or through international support from women's networks. Perhaps most important of all, such women dare to cross class boundaries to acquaint themselves personally with the sufferings of women and children (and sometimes men) beyond their everyday world. All these factors increase their ability to influence a male-dominated public sphere and, as I have argued here, to introduce new values of legitimate authority into the public domain.

Political motherhood in postcolonial nation-states has to be understood, this chapter has shown, as a process of discovery rather than a specific feminist movement or intellectual 'approach'. It draws on a hybridised variety of quite disparate discourses, some of them close to first-wave feminism, others quite contemporary and radical; some exclusive, others encompassing men too. Chantal Mouffe has argued that

the subjectivity of a given social agent is always precariously and provisionally fixed or, to use the Lacanian term, sutured at the intersection of various discourses. (Mouffe 1988: 90)

It is the generation of a 'totalising effect' from this discursive hybridity that allows the establishment of a

chain of equivalence among the different democratic struggles so as to create an equivalent articulation between the demands of women, blacks, workers, gays and others. (Mouffe 1993: 77)

The 'identity' of citizenship arises from a political subject's positioned interpretation of the principles of democracy (liberty, equality). A radical democratic vision stresses 'the numerous social relations in which situations of domination exist that must be challenged if the principles of liberty and equality are to apply' (ibid.: 84).

Like other post-liberal feminists such as Dietz (1992) or Phillips (1991, 1995), Mouffe thus stresses the principle of diversity in equality, or 'differential universalism' (Lister 1997: 39), while arguing for a kind of constitutional patriotism (Habermas 1994: 135). Historically, the principle of equality was
interpreted so as to exclude women, defined as essentially different, from the public sphere. At the same time, liberalism's espousal of freedom of association and freedom of the press enabled women (and some men), first in Britain and the US and later in colonial and postcolonial nations, to organise to challenge this false universalism. It can be said, then, that along with the stress on the autonomous individual, liberalism in its Anglo-Saxon version also, from the very start, advocated the value of social diversity as against homogeneity, and denied the possibility of an encompassing definition of a single 'common good'. It was, as Taylor has argued, 'procedural' rather than substantive (1992). But the historical paradox of modernity, namely, the reification of women as 'private' at the very moment of male emancipation, and more recent tensions between welfare protection and equal rights feminist activists, have highlighted the rhetorical need to stress that equality is not tantamount to a denial of social difference. It is a rhetoric directed against an understanding of 'the universalism of basic rights as an abstract levelling of distinctions, a levelling of both cultural and social differences' (Habermas 1994: 116). On the contrary, Habermas argues, the need is to increase the subtlety of context-specific protective legislation in order to recognise difference without thereby generating new forms of discrimination (ibid.: 114–16).

The feminisation of citizenship discussed in this chapter has for the most part not been achieved by women intending from the start to reform the basic liberal-democratic institutions of the political community. But in the course of their particular campaigns as women, mothers and conscientious or pious subjects, they have radically transformed the interpretation of universalism, human rights and the kind of human qualities and sentimental passions fundamental to citizenship and to the legitimate authority of the political community.

Notes

1. All three were members of the British Labour Party and all were representatives of constituencies with relatively large Asian populations.

2. In this sense my interpretation of diaspora is radically in disagreement with Anthias (1998) - who argues that the notion of diaspora precludes cross-ethnic and other transversal alliances.

3. For excellent surveys of a literature addressing the relation between maternalism, gender and the welfare state see Ross (1995) and Bursh (1996). Bursh raises the interesting question as to whether maternalism is not a 'feminism for hard times' which arises in response to an anti-feminist backlash (1996: 431). Her sceptical conclusion is that maternalism has not worked but may work if mixed with a broader agenda for citizens, workers and sexual autonomy (1996: 453–4).
References


