

**MARGINALIZED MOTHERS,
MOTHERING FROM THE MARGINS**

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ADVANCES IN GENDER RESEARCH VOLUME 25

MARGINALIZED MOTHERS, MOTHERING FROM THE MARGINS

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Tiffany Taylor and Katrina Bloch

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

We are pleased to include in our *Advances in Gender Research* series, volume 25 – *Marginalized Mothers, Mothering from the Margins*. Insofar as mothering is a critical aspect of gender differentiation and inequality, Tiffany Taylor and Katrina Bloch's volume is an important contribution to the study of gender. The volume considers the hidden, the overlooked, and the denied mothering that exist right alongside the greeting card images and verses sent on Mother's Day throughout the world, and in so doing brings us to a fuller understanding of mothers and mothering, thereby centering knowledge about this subject.

Vasilikie Demos and Marcia Texler Segal
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INTRODUCTION: BRINGING MARGINALIZED MOTHERS TO THE CENTER

Tiffany Taylor and Katrina Bloch

THE BEGINNING

Years ago, we sat on our front porch discussing our dissertations. These discussions were often venting sessions, in many ways, but they were also times to talk through our analyses. Over the course of these discussions, it became clear that welfare-to-work managers (Taylor's dissertation) and anti-immigrant groups (Bloch's dissertation) marginalized certain mothers in similar ways. Further, we realized, laws that exacerbated barriers faced by mothers receiving cash assistance and immigrant mothers were passed at the same time. Powerful racialized, gendered, classist, and xenophobic stereotypes held by outspoken people combined with neoliberalism helped fuel punitive legislation that eroded the safety net. Eventually we wrote a book chapter (Bloch & Taylor, 2014), but our interest in the marginalization of certain mothers and how mothers manage marginalization was born.

Over the last several years, Taylor began organizing sessions on research about marginalized mothers each year at the annual Southern Sociological Society meetings. From these sessions, an exciting network of emerging scholars discussed their research and found validation that this work was important. As the group of scholars grew, it became apparent that there needed to be a volume that centered on marginalized mothers. What structural barriers and stigmas do these mothers face? How do they experience and respond to these negative social forces? Why are laws and policies enacted and enforced that benefit some mothers while denying others of needed resources? With these questions in mind, we

distributed the call for chapters everywhere we could imagine. And, that brings us here, to this volume.

This volume includes work by an amazing group of scholars who examine the barriers, struggles, resilience, and resistance of marginalized mothers across the globe. Often barriers are created by and maintained by State institutions. Struggles are made worse by these institutions. Despite all this, many of the mothers remain resilient and resistant. These efforts do not come without costs to mental and physical health.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF MOTHERS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The media is full of images of what motherhood should look like. Instructional manuals, blogs, and so-called experts weigh in on the best practices for raising a child. They are typically written toward women and presume that mothers have copious amounts of time and resources. Hays (1996) writes about the cultural prevalence of an intensive mothering ideology, which expects that (a) women are the primary caregivers; (b) appropriate child rearing is based on expert knowledge, is child-centered, and takes a great deal of emotional, financial, and time investments; and (c) children are priceless and motherhood is sacred. However, this ideology grew from a glorification of a heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family that very few families ever resembled (Coontz, 2016).

While most mothers lack the resources to enact intensive mothering, Arendell (1999) argues this form of mothering is hegemonic and influences the way women of various social positions understand mothering. She further states:

Hegemonic motherhood is a patriarchal construction; it ties women's identities to their roles as child raisers and nurturers of others, more generally. Motherhood, no matter how closely conducted in accord with the ideological dictates, does not elevate its performers social and economic status to the social and economic status experienced by men collectively. (p. 4)

Similarly, Rothman (2000) argues that mothering is influenced by patriarchy as well as the ideologies of technology and capitalism. As such, we see a convergence of ideologies that serve to marginalize some mothers, and privilege others, based on intersections of race, gender, and class (Taylor, 2011). Certainly then, scholars studying mothers or mothering must understand and use an intersectional lens (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Using an intersectional lens helps researchers understand how systems of oppression interact in ways that produce different and distinct patterns of inequality for people with different privileged or disadvantaged statuses.

Systemic oppression takes many forms, including through the interplay between ideologies and institutions. Ideologies that privilege some mothers while marginalizing others are supported by institutions of the State (Ben-Ishai, 2012; Collins & Mayer, 2010; Gross, Turgeon, Taylor, & Wilkes, 2014) through policy-making (or the lack of, such as the failure to enact a comprehensive family medical leave policy in the United States) and policy implementation, including

surveillance and the policing of “good” versus “bad” mothering. Many marginalized mothers must deal with intrusive questioning, mandatory parenting classes, and other forms of paternalism from government institutions (Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011). In the United States, marginalized mothers who must rely on welfare are also required to work outside of the home to receive cash assistance. More and more states in the United States are moving toward requiring work for food assistance or medical assistance. Mandatory work requirements are fueled by neoliberal ideology that places greater value on paid work, in the formal economy, far more than the social reproductive labor involved with mothering (Ben-Ishai, 2012; Taylor, 2011).

Despite these constraints that marginalize mothers, and the barriers that marginalize mother’s face, scholars have documented the resilience and resistance of marginalized mothers. In particular, Collins (2002) has written extensively on the everyday resistance of Black mothers as they work to overcome controlling images through self-definition. Collins (2002) and Stack (1974) also show how poor women and/or women of color use cooperative care work, whether through other mothering or extensive kin networks, as a strategy to deal with economic disadvantage. Naples (1998) has dedicated much of her career in studying the resistance work of marginalized mothers, including mothers working in the Welfare Rights Movement in United States in the 1980s. Collins (2002), Stack (1974), and Naples (1998) demonstrate that resistance comes in many forms, from the subtlest everyday action to taking to the streets in an organized protest. While mothers engage in activist work through their everyday actions that build and sustain communities, they do so in the face of raced, classed, and gendered social policies. Readings in this volume illustrate the ways in which women challenge these barriers and seek to make differences in their families, in their communities, and in the institutions that marginalize them.

THIS VOLUME

This volume is intended to shed light on mothers in the margins. Authors in this volume give voice to mothers who are marginalized for a variety of reasons, ranging from incarceration to immigration, and the ways in which mothers’ intersecting identities, such as immigration status, race, class, disability, sexuality, and age, effect the expectations, treatment, and choices that mothers make. These chapters highlight the importance of understanding these intersecting forms of oppression for the construction of what types of mothers constitute idealized versus stigmatized mothers, and consequentially their experiences. We divided the chapters into three sections, including sections on: barriers that marginalize mothers, the borders of mothering, and mothering as resistance.

The first section of this volume calls attention to the barriers that marginalized mothers face. In the first chapter, Katz, based on her longitudinal study in the San Francisco Bay Area (USA), shows how mothers on welfare, struggling to improve their circumstances by going to college, find themselves negotiating the conflicting demands of being a mother with the bureaucratic demands of

welfare institutions and higher education institutions. In Chapter 2, Mannay et al. use visual ethnographic methods to demonstrate how age and class intersect to influence the marginalization and motherhood experienced in Welsh locales. These mothers experience surveillance and policing from the State as well as from friends, family, and even strangers. Mothers in both the Katz chapter and chapter by Mannay et al. find themselves negotiating their devaluation in their interactions with government institutions and their efforts to self-define and pride themselves as good mothers instead of shameful “others.” In Chapter 3, Rudzik documents the aspirations of low-income adolescent mothers in São Paulo, Brazil, and the barriers these young mothers face in achieving their aspirations. Notably, the aspirations of these young mothers varied depending on the class status of the mother’s parents. While young mothers from more affluent families held higher aspirations, and young mothers with less affluent parents held modest aspirations, young mothers from poor parents could not, or would not, comment on their aspirations at all.

Other chapters in this section focus on mothers of children with disabilities. In Chapter 4, Baker and Burton use the *three-city study* (Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio, USA) ethnographic data to inform their work. They illustrate the barriers as well as the physical and mental health costs (which they term “cumulative disadvantage”) of raising children with disabilities for economically disadvantaged mothers. Similarly, in Chapter 5, Stober and Franzese use in-depth interviews to examine how marginalization based on race, gender, and sexuality affect mothers with children who have development disabilities (DD). This marginalization based on their intersectional statuses is further exacerbated by the demands of parenting children with DD. Still, the mothers in their study find ways to cope with stress and maintain their resilience.

In the second section of the volume, chapter authors examine the borders of marginalized mothering. As [Mohanty \(2003, p. 2\)](#) states: “In my own life, borders have come in many guises, and I live with them inside as well as across racialized women’s communities.” In this spirit, we see borders as boundaries reflected through citizenship, walls, geography, dealings with intimate partners and welfare offices, or prison bars. Readings in this section highlight mothers’ efforts to transcend, resist, or even just survive experiences with borders. We begin the section with a reading that illustrates the significance of borders on people’s perceptions of “others.” In Chapter 6, Rodriguez finds that race and class ideology inform how readers of the *New York Times* view Chinese mothers who give birth in the United States and the legitimacy of their child’s citizenship. While some commenters explicitly draw from Asian stereotypes associated with the Yellow Peril to argue for exclusion, others rely on perceptions of the mother’s class privilege and supposed intelligence to support the legitimacy of the child’s citizenship status. Rodriguez argues that even arguments for inclusion are precarious at best and represent racialized conditional acceptance.

Mexican-immigrant mothers in the United States also face stereotypes informed by racism, sexism, and class ideology. In Chapter 7, Medwinter and Burton, using a subsample of Mexican-immigrant mothers from the *three-city study* (mentioned above), find that the mothers in their study specifically do,

undo, and redo gender through three strategies: symbolic reliance, selective reliance, and creative nondisclosure. Like the mothers in Chapter 2 by Mannay et al., Mexican-immigrant mothers in this chapter had to deal with policing from family members, specifically intimate partners, as well as the State. Also, the Mexican-immigrant mothers were strategic about not disclosing information to protect their families' privacy from the intrusiveness of the State.

In some situations, mothers make decisions that result in a separation from their children. In Chapter 8 by Magallanes-Gonzalez and Chapter 9 by Seepamore, we have examinations of the reasons for, and experiences of, mothers who respond to harsh economic marginalization by migrating away from their children to seek work elsewhere. In contrast to a mothering ideology that calls for mothers to be the caretakers, these women redefine motherhood to include economic provision. While the women in Seepamore's study could afford to send their children remittances and remain in contact with them, the migrant mothers in Magallanes-Gonzalez's study face economic barriers to even calling their children. These mothers are stuck in Morocco in transit to Europe in the hope of eventually being able to provide for and be reunited with their children. While in Morocco, the women fail to live up to their reason for leaving their children: being able to provide for them monetarily. Yet, the women's understanding of their own marginalized status allows them to maintain an identity of a "good" mother.

We also learn, in this section, that mothers are not always separated from their children by choice. In Chapter 10, Lockwood examines the struggles that incarcerated mothers experience, which for some include viewing interactions with their children as a double-edged sword. While connections with their children are something they want very badly, it is also something that is emotionally painful when the child leaves again. Guardians also control the access that these women have to their children. Additionally, the mothers strategically manage how much information they share with their children about their incarceration. Overall, some of the mothers Lockwood interviews view open communications as a strong mothering tactic that allows their children to cope with the situations, while others feel that concealing some information protects their child(ren) from unnecessary pain.

Certainly, mothers in each section resist their marginalization in a number of ways, but in the final section, mothers explicitly adopt mothering strategies of resistance or explicitly use their status as mothers in their activism. In Chapter 11, Crane and Christopher interview marginalized mothers in the United States about maternal support. They find that parenting strategies vary based on the intersections of race and class, with single Black mothers strategically using community support in a strategy that Crane and Christopher term "nurtured growth." Further, three mothers in their study used support systems for self-care and in mother-centric (vs child-centric) ways. This strategy is often met with critiques from their families that they were "parenting like a white person." Chapter 12 by Weigt builds from here and examines the care work strategies of women who have "timed out" of their lifetime allotment of welfare cash assistance. Like other chapters, the mothers work to protect their children and get resources, but they also learn ways to structure employment.

Some mothers also make major life changes to challenge structural inequality and stigmatization. For instance, the Black mothers interviewed by Taylor in Chapter 13 leave paid work to homeschool their children. Taylor finds that these mothers understand the systemic gendered racism they face and see homeschooling as a way to combat their marginalization and the marginalization of their children. Other women, like those interviewed by Wilson in Chapter 14, share breastmilk while attempting to counter the discourse that milk-sharing is risky. More affluent White milk sharers in Wilson's study often adopt a narrative of sharing breast milk as natural or "crunchy," while Latina and Black women were more likely to see their milk-sharing as social justice work in which they could self-define as good mothers.

Finally, in our last chapter, Chatillon and Schneider study a Texas (US) organization resisting police brutality. The organization, Mothers Against Police Brutality, uses activist mothering strategies to argue that Black and Brown children and their mothers are devalued and subjected to racialized state violence. However, they challenge this framing, arguing that boys of color have value. In doing so, they engage in community-building activities that strengthens other mother ties. They further call for institutional changes in policing to eliminate the raced, classed, and gendered policies that render boys of color dispensable and dangerous. In this way, the organization and its founder bring the marginalization of their mothering to the center of their activist mothering work.

In conclusion, the readings in this volume illustrate both the similarities and differences that marginalized mothers experience based on series of intersectional identities and geographic locations that place them in different places in an inequality structure (Collins, 2002). The authors examine the social actors who stigmatize and police the behavior of certain mothers. However, the chapters also show resilience in the ways that mothers challenge their marginalization. For some women, their day-to-day activities work to dismantle their marginalization, while other mothers engage in social movement activities and political activism.

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