

# Motherhood and Feminism: Relationship Through the Lens of the Movie *Suffragette*

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**Abstract.** While there has been an increasing amount of discussion around feminism, the relationship and controversies between motherhood and feminism has been relatively overlooked. Taking on a new perspective of films, this paper explores the relationship between motherhood and feminism through the content analysis of empirical research and the movie *Suffragette* (2015). Examining theories from feminists such as Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone, and Betty Friedan, this paper includes a supportive relationship, which is motherhood acting as a cause for feminism, a neutral relationship, which is the two being balanced and rather loosely connected, as well as a negative relationship, which is motherhood hindering and oppressing women. This paper concludes that while it is arguable that motherhood can be a hinder towards feminism, there is more evidence both in real-life and in the movie showing a supportive and neutral relationship. Thus, this encourages future researchers and feminists to more actively include motherhood in its activities considering their positive relationship.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Motherhood; *Suffragette*; Film.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, feminism has always been a heatedly discussed topic. According to the definition from Britannica, feminism is “the belief in full social, economic, and political equality for women” [1]. Because of the variety and varying definitions of feminism, this paper, abiding with the above definition, includes most movements that fight for female rights and equality such as women's suffrage as a part of the feminist movement. Before the feminist movements, the traditional view of women's roles was being wives and mothers and women's rights were severely limited [2]. They didn't have suffrage or the right to own properties and many, such as those living in nineteenth-century America and the United Kingdom, don't even have custody over their children [2][3]. While the situation for women has improved nowadays, there are still continuous debates and discussions revolving around it, especially around motherhood and feminism.

There are multiple viewpoints around the relationship between motherhood and feminism, some radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone see motherhood and childbearing as a tool of the patriarchy and a burden to women that only strengthens the oppression placed on women whereas other feminists argue otherwise [4]. However, despite these arguments, there is generally a lack of discussion and incorporation of motherhood into feminism, and “the topic comes up in fewer than 3% of papers, journal articles, or textbooks on modern gender theory,” as stated by Amy Westervelt, a journalist writing for *The Guardian* [4]. Therefore, stepping out of the circle of papers and articles, this paper examines the issue through not only research literature but also a film lens, specifically the movie *Suffragette*.

## 2. Analysis

*The Suffragette* (2015) is a historical drama directed by the female director Sarah Gavron [5]. It details the suffragette movement in 1912 London through the perspective of a lower-class laundry worker, Maud Watts. Being a 24-year-old woman who had been working in the laundry her whole life and had married and had a son, George, Maud found herself caught in the suffragette movement as her friend, Violet Miller, is an active participant in the suffragette. After a series of events, Maud became a suffragette and eventually fought for the cause to the end. In the movie, the relationship

between George and Maud, along with other female figures and their children, is a key component of Maud's shift in becoming a suffragette and the central idea of the movie. Thus, this paper seeks to explore and analyze the relationship between motherhood and feminism through research and the lens of the movie *Suffragette*, concluding that although motherhood can hinder feminism, it is more supported that motherhood can have a neutral, even positive relationship with feminism by serving as one of its causes.

## 2.1 A Positive Reinforcement between Motherhood and Feminism

Firstly, there is a positive reinforcement between motherhood and feminism, specifically motherhood serving as a cause of and supporting feminism. Historically, child custody had been a cause for many feminists. In the past, during the Anglo-American law time, father had the complete control over a child [6][7]. As described by Michael Grossberg, the children at the time were "assets of estates in which fathers had a vested right," and women did not have custody, guardianship, or the power to appoint testamentary guardians, leaving mothers completely powerless regarding their children [7]. It was only in the mid-19th century when the 1848 Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls happened did the changes started. At the Convention, women and men together signed a Declaration of Sentiments that "called for equal rights for women and men," advocating for the right of women to own properties, have equal education, and to this paper's focus, have custody over their children [7][8]. This Declaration of Sentiments, as well as other movements such as the Custody of Infants Act of 1839, resulted from the female activist Caroline Norton's active campaign and the appearance of child custody issue in women's rights meetings, were evidence of how motherhood can be a cause for feminists, showing a positive relationship between the two [7][9][10].

This idea is also shown in the movie *Suffragette*, especially in the relationship between Maud and George. Maud's love for George is shown throughout the movie through her words and actions. Apart from the daily routine of taking care of George, a particularly strong scene that describes Maud's love for George is when Maud was kicked out of the house by her husband, Sonny, due to her activities as a Suffragette. Despite being separated, Maud tried to reach George. One night, she stood on the street across from the house and, under the pouring rain, posed different gestures to make George laugh. In this scene, the contrast between the light and warmth of the house that George is in and the rainy and dark alley that Maud is in emphasizes the difficult situation Maud was in both physically and mentally. However, under such pressured conditions, she chose to try her best to comfort her son, characterizing her love as selfless, strong, and a good representation of motherhood. This motherhood and love indicated throughout the movie then became one of the most important incentives for Maud to truly become a suffragette. Earlier in the plot, Maud was offered a choice by Arthur Steed, an inspector of the government, to become an informer to help them fight against the suffragette. During Maud's reply, which is shown to the audience through a piece of monologue, she formally admitted her identity as a suffragette and stated that "if the law says I can't see my son, I will fight to change that law." This quote's sober tone indicates Maud's final transition to becoming a suffragette and also the direct influence of motherhood over this decision; it is exactly due to the child custody and her love towards her son, Maud must become a feminist and suffragette and child custody had thus become one of her causes, reinforcing the idea of feminism. Other examples of motherhood supporting feminism include how when Maud was hesitating about the suffragette movement, what determined her to join was when she talked to Sonny about if they had a daughter, what would her life be and received the answer of "same as yours," which is an underpaid, sexually harassed, and obedient life. Although Maud's thoughts were not described through dialogue, it can be inferred from her actions that she did not want her daughter, or any girl, to be born into the life of an oppressed woman, leading to her decision of participating in the suffragette movement. This, along with the previous description between Maud and George and evidence such as the Declaration of Sentiments, show how motherhood and love for their children can become one important cause for women to believe and fight for feminism, supporting and reinforcing feminism; thus, showing a positive relationship between the two.

## 2.2 A Balanced Relationship between Motherhood and Feminism

Another perspective on the relationship between motherhood and feminism, though not widely explored in the movie, is a balanced relationship. Adrienne Rich, a feminist writer and poet in the 1970s who began one of the first scholarly feminist analyses on motherhood, argued that motherhood and the child-bearing process itself is a “physical dimension of a woman’s being” and does not define the identity of a woman [4][11]. As described in an article from *The Guardian*, Rich stated that there was a “patriarchal notion of motherhood” that is creating oppression against women rather than the inherent meaning of motherhood [4]. Similarly, is the opinion of Betty Friedan, an activist and co-founder of the National Organization of Women [12]. Although Friedan was against domestic life at the beginning, publishing the book “*The Feminine Mystique*” and “heap[ing] scorn upon domestic life” by comparing it to a “comfortable concentration camp,” she admitted the importance and fulfilment of both domestic life and having a career [13]. Friedan agreed with the “family or the personhood of women” meanwhile arguing that society should “break through the feminine mystique,” achieving a balance between family and career [14]. Even though slightly different, both Friedan’s and Rich’s arguments have a relatively balanced and neutral stance, identifying motherhood and feminism as loosely and neutrally connected either through equal importance or the physical dimension, characterizing a balanced relationship between them.

## 2.3 A Negative Relationship between Motherhood and Feminism

Lastly, some feminists and scholars identify a negative relationship between motherhood and feminism, arguing that motherhood and childbirth are ultimately tools to oppress women. Scholars who believe in such a relationship include Shulamith Firestone as mentioned previously. Being a radical feminist, Firestone believed that the biological child-bearing of women is already a tool of oppression, that “pregnancy is barbaric,” and had once stated that “The heart of woman’s oppression is her childbearing and child-rearing roles” [15][16]. She believed that child-bearing, child-nurturing, and mother/child interdependency all resulted in the reliance of women on men and that historically, the lack of effective contraception led to an uncontrolled pregnancy cycle, worsening the situation [15][16]. Therefore, she envisioned artificial wombs that would overtake women’s roles in pregnancy, giving women more choice over their bodies, and that the role of raising a child will be overtaken by a collective community rather than individuals, allowing women to escape from “the tyranny of reproduction” [15]. Such opinion of Firestone is also widely held by the Radical-Libertarian feminists and the idea that motherhood would divert women from work and turn to the family instead is also partially shown in the movie [17]. When Violet Miller, an important female suffragette who first led Maud into the movement, found out that she was pregnant again, she had internal struggles and decided to stop continuing to be a part of the suffragette because of the efforts she needed to take care of her children, supporting Firestone’s claim on the oppression of pregnancy and the uncontrolled birth of women.

However, one can argue otherwise. Not only is a single mother an option now for many women, an example being Leah Campbell’s open discussion on Healthline about her single motherhood over her adopted daughter, but research from the National Library of Medicine also concluded a positive correlation between the importance of work and the importance of motherhood [18][19]. In the study, the author conducted surveys with 2,576 women, mothers and non-mothers, across the United States and concluded that, contrary to the common belief, mothers tend to value both work and motherhood at the same time and that the two identities do not necessarily contradict [19]. And even though Violet Miller’s example in the movie does show a negative relationship between motherhood and feminism, the main focus of the movie is around Maud’s transition to a suffragette and her relationship with her son, being a positive one, ultimately countering the negative correlation theory.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion, many perspectives on the relationship between motherhood and feminism have been explored. While movie may not fully represent real-life situations, there is more evidence both in literature and the movie *Suffragette* in general that shows a positive reinforcement or balanced relationship between the two. Thus, concluding that even though motherhood can hinder the feminist cause, there is most likely a supportive yet balanced relationship between the two through means such as the equal weight of work and motherhood and the latter being a cause and supporting the first. Currently, the increasing movie and research discussing feminism is a beginning step towards more gender equal society. However, more aspects of feminism such as motherhood should be considered to achieve true equality. Therefore, this paper's conclusion encourages future researchers and feminists to aim to integrate motherhood into their feminist researches more often in order to further advance in the feminism field and to include and benefit all women.

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