

PROJECT BRIEF

UN- MOTHERING THE WOMAN

Background

Author of *A Life's Work: On Becoming A Mother*, Rachel Cusk says that the experience of motherhood is an experience in contradiction. It is commonplace but also impossible to imagine. It is prosaic and it is mysterious. It is at once banal, bizarre, compelling, tedious, comic, and catastrophic. To become a mother is to become the chief actor in a drama of human existence to which no one turns up. It is the process by which an ordinary life is transformed unseen into a story of strange and powerful passions, of love and servitude, of confinement and compassion. I completely agree with her because at 23, newly married and pregnant, I realized that I had lost a huge part of myself I saw my identity shift from being a girlfriend, daughter, woman to mother and wife. I realized that I would never be free of societal gendered pressures, and that mothers (even those who are learned and may not agree with patriarchy's decrees), are complicit in pushing their daughters into socially desirable molds of womanhood because as maternal theorist Andrea O'Reilly notes, they recognize the institution's potential for punishing wayward women.

Everything from that point on was about mothering and motherhood. It became painfully clear to me that ideas about how mothers should be and act, and who deserved to be a mother, in my community were deeply entrenched in patriarchy and religious ideals and were way beyond my control. *In Mothering in Africa* Olonwumi agrees, noting that, in virtually every place and time, two words have been employed to denote and qualify the African woman: marriage and maternity. That is, womanhood in Africa can only be attained through motherhood. Aside from religious and cultural ideals that cloud our views of how mothering should happen, society has created images that denote who is a good or bad mom. Reading Susan Douglas's *The Mommy Myth*, I understood how the media has been portraying mothering to us. The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. From the moment we get up until the moment we collapse in bed at night, the media are out there, calling to us, yelling, "Hey you! Yeah, you! Are you really a good mother?"

This attitude isn't limited to just media—in Kenya motherhood is inextricably tied to the language of morality. Over and over, the message reinforced to expectant women and mothers is that there's a "right" and a "wrong" way to do things. You can't be single and be a good mother, you can't be queer and be a good mother or even how to be a good mother while in a political office.

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As a result, our culture has adopted the belief that sacrifice and suffering- in silence- are simply the costs of becoming a “good” mother.

In many African cultures, motherhood is not honored or congratulated by others; instead, it is seen as a type of duty the woman must perform. The duty is not solely becoming a mother and having children, but it is also the correct upbringing practices of the baby in order for it to grow in the community. Kami Fletcher notes that historically women were relegated to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere for the very reason that all women were socialized to be mothers – for the primary function of nurturing and raising children. At the very base of our society’s definition, mothering includes the act of birthing and raising kids. In our society we give persons who incubate and birth children the term mother. Mothering has become this socialized notion of innate nurturing whereby as someone sexed, female, one “instinctively” becomes a nurturer.

For me, mothering is more of a agreed upon continued care, a care that is learned over a time – started at conception, takes shape through pregnancy, and continues throughout the child’s life. In Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*, Ramatoulaye writes “*one is a mother in order to understand the inexplicable...one is a mother in order to love without beginning or end.*” For Ramatoulaye, motherhood is an ongoing, mysterious, hugely difficult, and ultimately reciprocal process. This is what Ramatoulaye and I define motherhood to be, I am hoping to talk to hundreds of other women who will share the definition of what a mother is or what motherhood should be.

I read and read some more because I had so many questions; why is it that we are taught to revere motherhood, but our society treats women who have children like crap? From inadequate maternity facilities to gender-based double standards like unpaid maternity leave, the “motherhood” wage gap, and our tendency to consider women’s value only in terms of their reproductive capacity. I was determined to understand how we got here as a society. These issues led me to ask deeper questions about female biology, as well as our “society’s expectations of” and policies toward mothers. Questions about breast-feeding, cultural myths, empty wombs, in particular, nagged me. For example, why do we share cultural myths about pregnancy and breast-feeding down from woman to woman when you know most are untrue? Douglas also agreed wondering that even though miscarriage is very common, we rarely talk about it openly, leaving women to endure it quietly and alone, often convinced that something they did may have caused it.

I wondered why we don’t have more of these candid conversations floating around? Why aren’t we as women shaping our own maternal anecdotes by telling our own stories? Instead, the information void is filled with opinions and information from sources that are not always accurate and often rooted in patriarchy. This information comes with sides of “*you don’t know and you*

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are not good enough” which frequently leave women feeling confused, alone, afraid, or, worse, ashamed.

In an attempt to try an answer my questions, I want to use storytelling to raise awareness and share the experiences of women on mothering and motherhood.

Being an avid reader and a feminist, digital storytelling emerged to me then as the best way to visually share our narratives. If other forms of media have been sequestered by, and complicit in, patriarchy, maybe feminists like me need to turn our attention to how to tell our collective stories better.

South African writer and feminist, Jennifer Radloff, notes that it is a sacred act to tell and to listen to stories. Some of our stories are rooted so deep in our cells, psyches and hearts, that it takes an act of courage to find the words to tell them. We each contain a multitude of stories that shape and make us who we are. We have stories that we can name as dreams or visions of how we imagine a better world for communities, families and ourselves. It can also be a political act to tell a story. Using the digital narrative art form, I want to interview single mothers, first time mothers, queer mothers, men who are mothering, grandmothers and women who don't want to be mothers. I want to draw and string narratives from our experience of mothering or motherhood intersected with our understanding of portrayal and stereotypes.

As feminists we are often called on to tell our stories of violence, resistance, pain but also of overcoming, surviving, of love, of friendships. We gather in small and large groups to witness, listen, celebrate, hold and honour each other through our stories. As we listen, we try and fit ourselves into the skin of the other to understand the pleasure, pain and the journey of another. I am hopeful that this sharing of stories will be empowering; as women get to know that they are not alone in having these thoughts and feelings. What I would like to create apart from being a knowledge portal and a support network, after a period of time the engagement will/should allow us to become a community.

I am hoping you will help us start this dialogue, share our conversations and be part of this story telling. - Amina Jasho