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## CAN A GROUP LIKE MOMSRISING.ORG LEAD THE U.S. TO A NEW BOTTOM LINE?

by Nanette Fondas

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The "Power of Onesies" campaign displayed baby clothes decorated with family leave and universal health care slogans at state capitols across the United States, as well as Washington, D. C.

MOMSRISING.ORG

Contemporary mothers have been notoriously difficult to organize for political action and social change, perhaps because they are chronically over-worked, sleep-deprived and likely to be busy organizing something themselves. But now a cyber-savvy, bootstrap organization called MomsRising.org seeks to change that. Recruiting thousands of mothers (and anyone who has a mother!) to join via its web site, MomsRising.org may have found the formula to engage, educate, and amplify the voices of America's millions of mothers—and in the process raise awareness of the idea of a New Bottom Line in America.

### Why a Moms' Movement?

The tug of work and family: that's what's on the minds of most women in America—"most" because most do become mothers (82% by the age of forty-four) and most mothers (75%) work in the paid labor force. Indeed, these mothers are so busy juggling their work and family commitments, they may be forgiven for not knowing that, on average, mothers earn 27% less than their male counterparts (with single mothers earning a whopping 40% less). And "juggling" is the word used when a mother is handling things relatively *successfully*. There are millions of mothers who would love to juggle but instead find themselves crushed: by the wage hits; by the lack of flexibility in their jobs (both to work reduced and/or flexible hours — particularly when children are young and without pay or promotion penalties—and to take time off when a child is sick or has a health or school emergency); by the realization that they must tolerate sub-standard child care because good alternatives are unaffordable; and by the fact that taking a leave, even an unpaid leave, following childbirth will surely lead to a pink slip.

It is facts like these that led Joan Blades and Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner to write a book called *The Motherhood Manifesto* and—when their research revealed that U.S. policies to support mothers and families lag well behind those of other industrial nations—to found MomsRising.org in May of 2006. Though the founders did not know one another before pairing up to write the book, this was a match waiting to

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We are an international community of people of many faiths calling for social justice and political freedom in the context of new structures of work, caring communities, and democratic social and economic arrangements. We seek to influence public discourse in order to inspire compassion, generosity, non-violence and recognition of the spiritual dimensions of life.

happen. Stay-at-home and working mothers had been essential to the success of the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, but since then mothers have not had a leading voice. Certainly pivotal books have been published along the way—including Naomi Wolf's *Misconceptions* (2001), Anne Crittenden's *The Price of Motherhood* (2001), and Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness* (2005) — which led to hopes that a mothers' movement would grow, but it never took off.

Blades and Rowe-Finkbeiner realized that organizing mothers was of key importance to moving the United States toward becoming more family-friendly and by doing that help women take the final step toward equality. Blades knew better than perhaps anyone in the country how to use new technology and specifically the Internet to organize and mobilize ordinary citizens for political action—she and her husband founded the 3 million-strong online grassroots organization MoveOn in 1998. And she is a mother, one who was shocked, she tells, to find out how often mothers today hit invisible “maternal walls” (akin to “glass ceilings”) of job and wage discrimination that impede their families' economic security. Rowe-Finkbeiner was less surprised by the scary statistics surrounding modern motherhood in the United States, having authored *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy—Women, Politics, and the Future* in 2004. She had also experienced first-hand some of the difficulties moms face such as the need for health care, parental leave, and other support following a child's birth.

Thus, they formed a team readied by knowledge, practice, and lived experience to move mothers and their allies to make social, political, and cultural change. Via house parties where people view a documentary version of *The Motherhood Manifesto* as well as email “outreaches” that can be passed along easily to other potential supporters, MomsRising.org started building a member list, which has grown to over 130,000. They also gathered eighty-five national and state organizations to become aligned with MomsRising. The aligned organizations represent a wide variety of groups including faith groups, child advocacy groups, unions, healthcare organizations, parenting groups, family advocacy groups, women's organizations, and mothers' organizations.

The MomsRising.org mission is summarized neatly by the acronym MOTHERS, in which M is for maternity and paternity leave, O for open, flexible work, T for technology and after-school programs, H for healthcare, E for excellent childcare, R for realistic and fair wages, and S for sick days for all. Once a person joins MomsRising.org, she or he can participate in working to make positive change in the MOTHERS areas in several ways. One is by taking the action called for in the email message each week (sometimes more often). Sometimes this involves signing a petition to support a piece of legislation, for example the Healthy Families Act, the Fair Pay Restoration Act, or the Breastfeeding Promotion Act. Other times it involves actually visiting a Congressperson's local office or even participating in a campaign such as the popular “Power of ONESie” display of decorated baby onesies in front of the Washington state capital to promote paid family leave. Members also send memorable e-cards to their friends to encourage them to join MomsRising, and they educate themselves by visiting the MomsRising.org web site, clicking on any of the MOTHERS topic tabs and the many other links therein, and reading and commenting on blog posts.

### Can MOTHERS Build A New Bottom Line?

For members of the Tikkun Community and the Network of Spiritual Progressives, MomsRising.org is an organization of interest because it implicitly accepts the challenge of building a New Bottom Line and working for transformation in large institutions so that human beings can love their families and care for them. This entails legislative advocacy and consciousness-raising to prod work organizations to develop a sense of respect for their employees' non-worker/productive, non-material, non-individualistic selves. Indeed, MomsRising implicitly stands for the idea that no one should have to choose between the job they need and the family they love.

MomsRising's members, unfortunately, have shared numerous stories of job loss and demotions imposed on them by un-transformed organizations—when they needed, for example, a less rigid work schedule; acceptance of pregnancy on the job; the same, competitive wage others in comparable positions were receiving; or breastfeeding support, such as privacy to pump milk for a newborn. Members' messages conveying these stories usually end with a plea for help in changing the American workplace to embrace the less tangible needs of mothers (and every human being) for connecting, caring, reciprocity, and love.

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It is quite possible that mothers are first to feel the harsh realities of the old bottom line. Mothers still do the second shift (most of the child care and family chores on top of their paycheck jobs) and feel the toll that overly greedy jobs, bosses, and organizations take on their families and themselves. And if mothers are still the primary caregivers in their families, does that not mean their little ones feel the crush too? Of course it does, and mothers know this. It is their voices (and those of their allies) that can help lead to a New Bottom Line—to what MomsRising calls a truly family-friendly America.

Devising workable policies in service of this aim lies at the heart of the MomsRising platform. It is nothing less than the seed of the idea of a new social contract—one that recognizes that the obligations felt by post-war corporations toward workers and communities and the middle class security they provided must be updated for an age when job losses and churn are accelerated and most mothers are in paid employment. As Rowe-Finkbeiner likes to point out, the United States has changed over the past several decades, but work/family policies have not: they are stuck in a 1950s mindset of wife-at-home with children; and many countries have outpaced the United States in adapting to 21st century realities.

This is one of the great challenges at this moment in U.S. history. Few Americans would be anything but grateful if the organizations in which they labor could help them realize synergy between their work and non-work lives. For those who find this mission compelling and urgent, MomsRising.org offers the opportunity to amplify their voices and place them at the center of the nation's political dialogue. A mom at home can become a naptime activist; a mom at work can become a lunchtime activist. Until now, it was nearly impossible for busy mothers to participate in our democracy with such intensity and impact. Their conversation in the MomsRising virtual kitchen has new power to move their issues and those of their families from the back burner to the front—even if mother is still a little tired.

*Nanette Fondas has authored award-winning articles on the economics and sociology of work, family, and management; and taught at Harvard, Duke, and UC Berkeley. She recently joined the executive team of MomsRising.org.*

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