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# **From Motherhood to Sister-Solidarity: Home-making as a Counterdiscourse to Corporate Environmental Polluting**

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**Abstract. This presentation examines the conjunction between women-homemakers and contaminated spaces, both public and private. Learning for the women was embedded in concerns about motherhood and domesticity. Although the women never expressed their solidarity in terms of sisterhood or feminist language, they functioned as a cohesive group consciously aware of their marginalized status as women. But the "girls solidarity" was not the source of political action, rather it was the context for it. Domesticity and motherhood was a substantially stronger antecedent for action that enabled the women to build the notion that they could challenge power relations, values and beliefs of the dominant culture in the community.**

## **Introduction**

It is well recognized that labor is a genderized phenomenon, and that "work" performed by women in the home is undervalued. Adrienne Rich has pointed to the domestic labors that reproduce, maintain, and sustain life--the million tiny stitches, the friction of the scrubbing brush, the cleaning up of the soil and waste left behind by men and children--as the unrewarded (and socially constructed) domain of women. In a world increasingly driven by commodity capitalism--often at the expense of the environment--little value is placed on the labor of maintenance. The labor of commerce is privileged labor, engaged in by men and some upper class women who pursue profit in the market place, in the world of industry, finance, and government. As such, the health and safety of families is often fabricated as predominantly women's responsibility.

This study is one portion of a larger four year investigation (Hill, 1997) that examined how a grassroots, self-organized, action-oriented group--comprised largely of housewives--engaged in the contest for cultural authority at a heavy-metal contaminated Superfund site. Their northern Appalachian town was shaped by a corporate discourse that deflected responsibility for the pollution and allowed for both on-going and historical contamination of thousands of acres of forest lands, residential homes and yards and public spaces. In 1990, six women gathered to raise the first public voice that spoke "otherwise" to the normative (industrial) discourse in the town.

Within one year they had organized a grassroots group to promote clean up; their goals included environmental reform and relief from toxic exposure.

### Purpose of Study

This presentation examines person-place relationships, specifically, the conjunction between women-homemakers and contaminated spaces, both public and private. The women in the study presented themselves as caretakers of their families and guardians of healthy life-spaces. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between women's labor of maintenance (acts aimed to reproduce, maintain, and sustain life), and the politics of toxic exposure (life in a poisoned place). A goal was to examine the processes of cultural production, sense- and meaning-making, learning to transgress, opening of descriptive spaces, and the dynamics of the contest for cultural authority in the polluted community.

### Theoretical Perspective

This qualitative study is shaped by the environmental work conducted at Highlander Research and Education Center which marks the exception to the silence of adult educators in regard to environmental adult education and the struggle of local communities to control the meaning of environmental hazards that they experience. It is premised on the belief that contemporary adult education should inform a society to become eco-literate, and integrate environmental issues with education for social change. Members, often largely women, of toxic-contaminated communities are engaged in resistance to the particular ends, direction and interests of dominant social groups' sense-making--especially when such meaning-making is dominated by corporate interests. Like Lewin's work (1946), this study was intended to assist people in improving their living conditions, in democratic decision-making, and in the commitment to a more equitable distribution of power.

### Research Design

The reviewed literature included adult education and citizen (environmental) activism, and the sociology of education. I was interested in employing a methodology that provided rich, descriptive data about contexts, activities, and beliefs of the participants. Depth interviews (deliberate sampling) within an interpretive framework, as a part of critical ethnographic methodologies, were deemed appropriate for this purpose (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). A key aspect of the research was to continually return to the participants "with the tentative results, and [to refine] them in light of the subject's reactions" (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 248)--a process known as "member checks." A collaborative approach was employed in an effort to empower the researched, and to ascertain credible data, validly collected and analyzed. Freire's "problem-posing" framework (Freire & Faundez, 1989) was used as a reference for data analysis. The responses of six key informants are reported here, with additional corroborative voices of women members of the grassroots anti-toxics group.

## Findings and Discussion

The women reported that from private locations (kitchens and other domestic sites) and borrowed public spaces (such as the public swimming pool), they engaged in a process of transformation from isolated individuals to collective agents contesting the community script by simply "telling our stories" and "asking menacing questions." Learning for the women--organic intellectuals in the community--was most often embedded in concerns about motherhood and domesticity which became "generative themes" for community development and community education. Asking menacing questions--initially an unconscious pedagogical activity--brought about "problem-posing dialogue" for critical learning. The women's questions probed social behaviors and experiences in everyday life in a way that allowed critical-democratic dialogue to materialize; isolated home-makers became civic leaders.

Although the women never expressed their solidarity in terms of sisterhood or feminist language, they functioned as a cohesive group consciously aware of their marginalized status as women. Yet, they constructed a space where hope was possible. One respondent put it this way, "the women envisioned the future." This women-vision included environmental reform which resulted in protective environmental policies and regulations as well as agency enforcement of existing laws. Their women-vision desired an industry that operated safely and a landscape--both constructed (lawns, play areas, streets and homes) as well as natural (the mountain, valley, and neighboring creek) that was free from contamination. Talking about this vision, another informant spoke that the emergence of the women placed the community at a "crossroads, because it was the first time that there was an organized effort to question the industry and the officials...in [this town]. And that basically...was the turning point....It wasn't just one speaking--it was organized."

For some, the grassroots group was an important women-space where identities could be reconstructed and personal feelings expressed in a secure climate. The women freely referred to the group as "the girls." One of the women reported that her involvement was both a transient estrangement on her relationship with her husband, as well as an opportunity to exercise independence and freedom from assuming his identity. She spoke that her "husband was aghast [when I talked publicly]. [He saw it as] terrible, [saying], 'Did you really think this through?' and 'I'm not sure I want you to do that. You should have talked with me first and I would have told you how to handle it,' sort of things--the control issue. [He indirectly was saying], 'You're doing something and I'm not controlling you,' and 'it looks bad on me.'" By assuming the role of leadership, she opened up new areas for both personal growth and for a fuller development of her married life. She reported that leadership in the group resulted in a renewed commitment to dialog with her husband to "work things out." However, she emphasized that she remained firm in her dedication to the other women and the goals of the group.

For another interviewee, the group was a welcomed opportunity, as well as painful one, to become involved in what was happening. Taking up a defiant voice was distressing for her in that it moved her out of her "comfort zone." However, it was a desirable chance to do what she always enjoyed most--"reading, and researching and meeting with people." She disdained what

she characterized as, "from a women's perspective, [sitting] all day long and watch[ing] the [TV] 'soaps' ...and talk shows [like so many women in the town do]."

One individual remarked that in the early stages of involvement in environmental issues in the community her marriage was affected, saying "it's difficult when you're going to one or two meetings a week and it's time away from your children...but now that I'm sitting past the emotional upheavals that I've experienced, it all seems, oh, so wonderful [knowing I'm doing what's right]."

After one group meeting, during which I presented some of my preliminary research results, a founding leader said as she was donning her winter coat, "Amazing! I *am* (her emphasis) important! I'm going home and tell [husband's name] that I'm not just a housewife cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors--I'm important!" At times the women even impressed themselves with what they accomplished. One marveled, "it's amazing [that] six women can get around the entire town [when they had to distribute fliers]." Such increased self-perception within women who participate in adult education has been noted elsewhere (Luttrell, 1989, p. 34). Changes in a "sense of self" accompany transformation of a meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

One woman, not a founding principal of the group, told me that she seldom consciously thought about being a woman or about being from the town until "[the group] formed and I saw the stand some of these women took...over great protest locally by a lot of industry supporters--[despite] personal attacks, [I] realized how proud I was to be not just a woman, but a woman from [here]! That's a real proud thing to be....I think these gals, who didn't expect to be in that kind of limelight--to stand up and make a statement, just made me really proud to be affiliated with them." But sisterhood and the "girls solidarity" were not the source of political action, rather they were the context for it. Domesticity was a substantially stronger antecedent for action that enabled the women to build the notion that they could challenge power relations, values and beliefs of the dominant culture in the community.

During a conversation in one of the feedback sessions with which she was involved, a respondent suggested I had mischaracterized her motivation to become involved in social change. She reminded me that she did not set out "to raise a defiant voice"--a behavioral portrait I had painted of her and other group members. Any transgressive acts by her were secondary to the real purpose of involvement, which was the protection of her (and all of the community's) children. She was primarily concerned with family safety, not conduct resistant to hegemonic discourses. Opening a narrative space for the articulation of new knowledges was a motivating factor. She said that she entered into what amounted to defiant behavior very subtly, "it wasn't even a conscious effort, like when I read your piece about transgression--[my involvement] had nothing even to do with that. It was just my kids. I'm raising my kids here [and] we're bringing hazardous waste in, we need to make a change--we need to do it right. Especially because in the back of my mind I knew about the Superfund issue." Another women reported that engaging in transgressive behavior was not a primary motivation. She said, "I don't think there were any thoughts about rebellion or going against the company....It was strictly me doing something for my family, for my property and for my neighbors, and I think that's all it was." The "doing something" meant learning to construct, and then articulate knowledges alternative to the industrial discourse.

Although "coping" with stress is a complex phenomenon, gender-related characteristics have been described (Hobfoll, et al., 1994). Researchers have found that women are more likely than men to approach community stress through pro-social behavior, and "active" (assertive) coping strategies, rather than anti-social and aggressive ones. They frequently seek social support as well as offer it to others. Women have been found to customarily use emotion-focused and problem-focused social strategies. Examples from the women's experiences show how they related family (emotion-centered) concerns to problem solving.

All informants were attentive to the fact that they were marked as "different" by many members of the community; they were genderized in a demeaning way. One respondent saw that the difference was rooted in inferior notions of women who work at home. She said, "at first the industry would mock us saying we were radical and hysterical housewives. There was nothing hysterical in me!" Another spoke of the Othering which she and fellow members experienced, "the industry people--and a lot of people--try to make [us] into fanatical, crazy housewives who don't have anything better to do than test our porch dust [for contamination]." One said she felt the impacts of being marked as deviant: "Talk about being patted on the head. They kept using the word 'housecleaning' and stuff like that, it's just like housecleaning problems we're having down there, ladies, you know." They treated her with the attitude, "go home and bake something...go bake some cookies or something." Environmental consciousness became a sexually coded word linking women with an anti-industrial discourse.

Although not directly articulated, most of the women in the group agreed that their concerns originated in domesticity, that is, making and keeping the domestic sphere a protected and salubrious place in which to live. The emerging citizens group's center of gravity was the home and hearth. Their lives consisted of domocentric patterns; the home, therefore, became the arena in which they were conscientized to contamination.

The women frequently used the term, "clean up" in our conversations. They extended the concept from personal homes to the local milieu since for them the home was a part of the social and cultural surroundings. Once when asked by one of her children, "Mom, where ya goin'?" a member responded, "[To a] meeting! I'm gonna clean this town up yet!" Every respondent offered comments on the dirt that was a daily occurrence in their lives, and the daily cleansing rituals with which they had to contend. Ablutions were a fact of life. One said, "You live here, you cleaned and you cleaned black dirt and you didn't much question what was in it."

Car washing rituals were also mentioned by numerous respondents. One gave a litany of ablutions that she would perform, saying, "[I would] wash the car twice a week, wash the porch three times a week, [and] wipe the window sills." Another claimed, "You could wipe your window sills off with a tissue every other day and the tissue would be black. Every other day!" She even considered at one point, "putting the tissues in a plastic bag, putting them in an envelop and mailing [the dirty tissues to opponents]".

One of the more powerful forces shaping the group's attitudes and beliefs were children. The role of "traditional" motherhood was the significant antecedent to political action. The grassroots members who were mothers often expressed that they were insulted when the quality and integrity of their motherhood was called into question. One reported that the community

discourse on health was related to children care. If there was something wrong with a child, popular wisdom, based on information provided by the official makers of knowledge, was "You have to change [the kid's] diet. He needs a multivitamin. He has poor hygiene." "What's the doctor doing?" she asked rhetorically. She answered that most of the town's folk would not look for metal exposure, but instead would suggest to "straighten out his diet, give him a multivitamin and clean his hands a little bit more and he'll get better."

Domesticity moved beyond private attempts to have a safe home and hearth. In a seeming challenge to home makers to chase more dirt, an industry-funded community group purchased a special vacuum sweeper and unique soaps which they loaned to residents for domestic dust control. In 1992, the town received \$18,000 to purchase a new street sweeper to suck up dust and dirt from the roads. Vacuuming was elevated to an art form in 1996 when the federal government began to utilize a specially designed vacuum cleaner mounted on the back of a truck to vacuum boulders on the landscape. Vacuuming rocks became the quintessential obsession with cleanliness; the federal government assumed the image of new handmaids in white decontamination suits tidying up the natural environment.

The relationship between domesticity and environmentalism was voiced by one woman while reflecting on the talks she would give at public meetings at the beginning of their public struggle, "basically I just made the plea for everybody to start being an environmentalist in their own homes!"

The women were engaged in a transformative process to ensure that their town, a community-at-risk, would become a community-at-promise; caring, hope and possibility were its central moments. The theme of hope, faith in ordinary people, a sense of personal and community pride, and courage repeatedly emerged in the interviews with group members. Ethics saturated their rationale for: assigning responsibility to the industry, taking up a practice of caring, a pedagogy of hope, feelings of pride and courage, and for mobilizing the desire for a bright future.

Radical democratic processes in the group were a microcosm that deviated from the processes that occurred in the larger public sphere--a sphere where there exists a fundamental gap between constitutional, legal, and regulatory commitments to a clean environment and the harsh realities of people's lives. Environmental reform for the women consisted of rewriting the boundaries of environmental discourse from the vision of an industrial ethic to that of a human-centered one; from one premised on singular and narrowly prescribed notions, to one based on a diversity of information; from a static one rooted in education that reinforced the *status quo*, to one that flowed from the perception that there are multiple ways of seeing; and from the constricted borders of science, to one that integrated science with ethics infused with hope in an equitable future.

The women created a new place, an interrogative- and narrative-space, from which alternatives were articulated and individuals engaged in the social practice of learning; it allowed formerly unsayable utterances to have a voice; it gave shape to what could be thought in a milieu that formerly was impregnated with controlling citizens' consciousness. The working-class women became a model of civic courage which led to growing a grassroots movement that significantly changed the landscape of their contaminated community.

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