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## Mobilizing motherhood: The gendered burden of environmental protection

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### Abstract

Maternalist framing has been a consistent part of a long history of powerful, often successful organizing for environmental protection and justice. Yet today's calls on individuals to simultaneously engage in proenvironmental behavior and to protect themselves from environmental threats through consumption have mobilized maternal discourse in a way that is likely demobilizing in the long run. Indeed, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement is intersecting with persistent, unequal gendered structures of labor in a way that places the burden of environmentalism and environmental risk management on women and mothers. I argue that precautionary consumption and other forms of individualized environmental risk management add to the "third shift," on top of the disproportionate burden of household labor and care work that women already face. This phenomenon is concerning because it has the potential to (1) limit women's engagement in other forms of environmental advocacy and leadership, and to (2) reproduce existing gender inequalities not only between men and women but also *among* women of different levels of race and class privilege. Thus, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement also potentially exacerbates environmental injustice at the household level. Despite such emerging concerns, the domestic scale remains an often overlooked site of environmental harm and gendered burden.

### Keywords

consumption; environmental health; environmental justice; gender; maternalism; motherhood; social movements

## 1 | MOBILIZING MOTHERHOOD: THE GENDERED BURDEN OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Under neoliberalization and continued rollbacks of state-led environmental regulations, a greater share of responsibility for environmental governance has fallen on non-state actors (Bartley, 2007; Cashore et al., 2004; McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Accordingly, environmental movement organizations have increasingly shifted to market-based approaches in order to achieve their objectives, even as they continue to advocate for regulatory change (Konefal, 2012). The consumer has thus become a key agent in the narrative for positive environmental change, and consumption is also increasingly understood as a tool through which individuals can and should avoid unnecessary toxic exposure. In other words, the work of environmental protection and risk management has increasingly shifted into the realm of individual responsibility (Maniates, 2001; Szasz, 2007). This is a problem because (1) consumers may be left with a false sense of security that can diminish the urgency of collective action needed for systemic change, and (2) an individualized model of nontoxic consumption privileges those consumers who have access to nontoxic goods, leaving others vastly underprotected.

In this paper, I discuss a third problem with the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and market-based solutions to environmental issues: the exacerbation of the gendered burden of environmental harm. As a growing body of literature at the intersection of environmental sociology and gender studies reveals, such individualized approaches fall more heavily on women, particularly those who are tasked with the work of feeding, caring for, and protecting their families. Even environmental advocacy groups that acknowledge the failure of regulatory agencies often perpetuate the notion that individual mothers are ultimately responsible for protecting their children against pollution (MacKendrick & Cairns, 2019). Indeed, everyday precaution in avoiding harmful exposures to toxic chemicals through food and consumer products is becoming another component of responsible mothering subject to moral judgment (MacKendrick, 2014). This departs from earlier modes of maternal framing that focused on community protection and stopping pollution at its source. Women engaged in environmental activism historically justified their work in ways that align with and extend traditionally feminine identities and responsibilities; many women's environmental organizations during the Progressive era used the language of mothering and "public housekeeping" (Addams, 1915), particularly in relation to keeping urban environments clean and livable (Rome, 2006). Similarly, early women environmental justice organizers presented a community-oriented notion of motherhood that encouraged advocacy outside of the home (Peeples & DeLuca, 2006). But in the age of precautionary and ethical consumption, maternal discourse is increasingly mobilized in a way that prioritizes protecting oneself and one's own family.

Scholars have not only documented a gender gap in precautionary consumption, but also in household-level proenvironmental behavior (Dzialo, 2017; Organo et al., 2013). Yet this gender gap has rarely been treated as problematic by environmental sociologists and is not conceptualized as another example of women's unpaid labor (Kennedy & Kmec, 2018). This is reflective of the overall absence of gendered and feminist perspectives within environmental sociology and environmental justice scholarship, which several scholars have repeatedly called attention to in the past decade (Dzialo & Kennedy, 2015; McWright & Xiao, 2014; Buckingham & Kulcur, 2009; Banerjee & Bell, 2007). Gendered and/or feminist perspectives are also largely missing from environmental justice policy, discourse, and activism (K. Bell 2016). It is concerning that the domestic scale remains an underexamined site of environmental harm and gendered burden.

I argue that precautionary consumption and other forms of individualized environmental risk management add to the “third shift” (Hochschild, 1997), on top of the disproportionate burden of household labor and care work that women already face.<sup>1</sup> As stated by Buckingham and Kulcur (2009), the persistent gendered domestic division of labor is a social injustice that is compounded by modern environmental risks. Not only is this third shift a problem in and of itself, in that it is yet another form of unpaid labor performed predominantly by women, but it is also a demobilizing force. Just as the environmental movement gave women the opportunity to impact public life in order to protect their family, today’s calls on women to protect their families push them back into the household and urge them to engage in more household labor and consumerism. Moreover, not only does precautionary consumption offer inadequate protection overall, but it potentially reproduces existing gender inequalities between men and women and also *among* women of different levels of race and class privilege. Low-income and racial-ethnic minority women are not only more likely to have greater exposure to environmental hazards by way of their geographic location, but they are also less likely to have the time and resources to engage in precautionary consumption and behavior. Thus, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement also potentially exacerbates environmental injustice at the household level.

In this paper, I begin with a brief overview of literature that points to the increasing individualization of the environmental movement under neoliberalism. I then explore the politics of motherhood in social movements, and how the maternal role serves both as an impetus for action and as a frame through which mobilization occurs. A key insight offered by this literature is that movements with feminine identities face a “double bind” (Einwohner et al., 2000), in that while such identities may help movement participants establish legitimacy, they may not provide long-term political effectiveness and agency. I then examine how this double bind has played out in women’s environmental activism, while emphasizing that maternalist framing has been a consistent part of a long history of powerful, often successful organizing for environmental protection and justice. The latter half of the paper builds toward an understanding of how maternal responsibility and discourse has taken on a new meaning in the contemporary environmental movement. I conclude by outlining areas for future research on gender and environmental inequality.

## 2 | INDIVIDUALIZATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Under neoliberalization and continued rollbacks of state-led environmental regulations, environmental movement organizations have increasingly shifted to market-based approaches in order to achieve their objectives (Konefal, 2012). Such efforts aim to exert pressure on manufacturers and other upstream actors to adopt more sustainable practices and to produce goods that do not harm the environment. For example, environmental movement organizations have had some success in directly confronting corporations through market-based “shame campaigns” that highlight unsustainable practices along their supply chains,

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<sup>1</sup>As Arlie Hochschild highlighted in *The Second Shift* (1989), women continue to shoulder the majority of housework even in dual-earner households. This creates a “second shift” for women who have families and also work outside the home. In *The Time Bind* (1997), Hochschild (1997) introduced the concept of the “third shift,” or the work of “noticing, understanding, and coping with the emotional consequences of the second shift” (p. 215). I am proposing an expansion of this concept.

threatening brand reputation, and demanding change (Bloomfield, 2014). In publicizing product-testing results through shame campaigns and informative reports, environmental advocacy groups alert consumers that their assumptions about product safety may be misguided, and that certain risks associated with everyday products warrant concern (Cousins et al., 2019; Faber et al., 2016).

Recognizing the significance of consumer-driven strategies, a growing number of advocacy initiatives aim to boost consumer awareness of potential chemical health risks and exposure pathways through phone apps and websites allowing consumers to access third party assessments of the safety of household items. The Environmental Working Group's Skin Deep online database, for example, allows consumers to look up ingredient information on cosmetics and personal care products. This platform rates each ingredient with a "hazard score" based on use restrictions, data gaps, toxicity, persistence, and exposure sources, and the product is given an overall hazard score based on all ingredients. While such tools are certainly valuable in helping consumers avoid unnecessary exposure, they arguably feed into the growing shift toward individualized responses to collective environmental threats.

One of the potential problems with such "individualization of responsibility" (Maniates, 2001) is that it dilutes the potential for collective action needed for systemic change. As consumers scramble to protect themselves from a contaminated environment through nontoxic consumption, they may be left with a false sense of security that can diminish the urgency of collective calls for regulatory reform (Szasz, 2007). The same can be said of everyday proenvironmental behavior; as articulated by Sandilands (1993), the privatization of environmental change depoliticizes environmental problems, "shift[ing] the burden of responsibility onto individuals and households, and away from states, corporations, and global political arrangements" (p. 45). Moreover, an individualized model of nontoxic consumption privileges those consumers who have enough time, money, environmental health literacy, and access to nontoxic goods—broadly speaking, the wealthy, white, highly educated consumer—leaving lower income and minority populations vastly underprotected.

In the remainder of this paper, I build toward a discussion of a third and equally important cost of the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility and market-based solutions to environmental problems: the exacerbation of the gendered burden of environmental threats. While the domestic scale remains an often overlooked site of environmental harm, a growing body of literature reveals that women are more likely to shoulder a disproportionate burden of everyday forms of environmental risk management in the household. Indeed, while motherhood has historically been a highly productive mobilizing frame for environmental engagement, and in many cases still is, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement under neoliberalism is intersecting with persistent, unequal gendered structures of labor in a way that places the burden of environmental risk management on women.

### 3 | MOTHERHOOD AS A MOBILIZING FRAME

Recent scholarship has increasingly revealed the various ways in which gender and social movements intersect. I join others in starting with the assumption that social movements are inherently gendered, whether or not they explicitly or intentionally focus on gender-related

goals (Einwohner et al., 2000; Taylor, 1999). Various features of movements may invoke gendered meanings, including composition, goals, strategies, identity, or the perceptions of the movement by outsiders. One way in which gender figures prominently in social movements is through framing. As stated by Snow et al. (1986, p. 464), “by rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.” Frames are useful in recruiting social movement participants and building collective identity, defined by Polletta and Jasper (2001, p. 285) as an “individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution.”

Moreover, certain frames can help movements and actors appear legitimate to outside observers, and thus increase the likelihood of reaching positive outcomes. Social movement scholars refer to this as “narrative fidelity,” or the extent to which movement framing resonates with the targets’ cultural narrations and ideologies (Benford & Snow, 2000). Indeed, scholarship on women’s activism and organizing has shown that women’s activism is heavily shaped by socially constructed gender norms (Ferree & Mueller, 2004; Ray, 1999; Waylen, 2007). Naturally, framing that aligns with widely accepted feminine gender stereotypes may help women activists reach out to and motivate other women to act. Such framing may help prospective women participants to see an alignment between their personal identities and the movement’s collective identity, a process that Snow and McAdam (2000) refer to as “identity correspondence.” Moreover, by strategically enacting socially accepted gender norms, thus appearing nonthreatening and apolitical, women may be able to achieve greater success in the public sphere and reduce opposition (Erickson & Faria, 2011; Ray, 1999).

Feminist scholarship has long examined the politics of motherhood, and how the maternal role serves both as an impetus for action and as a frame through which mobilization occurs (Shriver et al., 2013). As defined by Carreon and Moghadam (2015), a *maternalist frame* refers to the “elements of motherhood, mothering, and maternal identities deployed to evoke meanings within a given context and elicit participation and/or support of collective action” (p. 19). While the deployment of motherhood framing and other feminized forms of activism may be interpreted as a depoliticization of women’s activism, some feminist scholars have instead argued that it exemplifies valuable resistance and empowerment. Indeed, historical examples reveal great successes of women organizing under the frame of motherhood. Middle-class women in the Progressive Era, for example, were able to have a significant impact on social reform at a time when they were largely excluded from formal political processes and decision-making. Their maternalist political rhetoric was highly effective in persuading legislators and civic leaders across partisan lines to adopt various social policies, including certain protective labor laws that otherwise may have been considered too paternalistic (Skocpol, 1992).

Indeed, women across societies and throughout history have invoked their maternal and reproductive roles to make demands for human rights, justice, peace, suffrage, and social provisioning for all (Carreon & Moghadam, 2015). Naples (1998) introduced the term “activist mothering” to conceptualize the politicization of motherhood that she observed in her longitudinal study of women community workers in low-income neighborhoods in New

York City and Philadelphia, who were hired in Community Action Programs during the War on Poverty. Community workers defined their mothering responsibilities as encompassing all actions—including social activism—that addressed the needs of not only their children, but also the whole community. In exploring women’s participation in social movements in Argentina, Di Marco (2009) similarly refers to the politicization of motherhood as “social motherhood” that “turns needs related to children into political demands and thus promotes political action” (p. 53). Such was the case with the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, who effectively mobilized to trace the whereabouts of their missing children and grandchildren after the “dirty wars” and to demand reparations for the state-enforced perpetration of violence (Arditi, 1999).

Yet there remains a paradox for women activists and feminized movements, in that feminized gender identities can be used to the detriment of movement participants. As Einwohner et al. (2000) point out, culturally available gender constructs are at the disposal of not only social movement actors but also other actors, and thus gendered meanings may be attributed to movements by outside observers and opponents. Gender representations are available as a “means of evaluation,” and thus gender can be “manipulated strategically by all actors in a political arena, not only by movement participants themselves” (Einwohner et al., 2000). Extending this logic further, Einwohner et al. (2000) argue that ultimately, movements with feminine identities face a “double bind.” On one hand, representations of femininity and adherence to traditional gender norms that resonate with established cultural beliefs may help movement organizations and actors establish legitimacy and provide a nonthreatening front. Yet on the other hand, such identities may not help them sustain long-term political effectiveness and agency, due to the deeply ingrained association between political power and masculinity.

It is important to note that certain feminized gender identities have not historically been readily available to all women in the US context. This is certainly the case for the use of motherhood as a political resource. As argued by Collins (2014), in the late 20th century, “real” and “good” mothers were those who were affluent, married, holding American citizenship, and, most importantly, white. Their status as mothers was largely valued for their ability to reproduce whiteness. In contrast, Black mothers were subject to racist perceptions that they were reproducers of poverty and delinquency, as evident in national welfare debates of the 1990s.

Of course, notions of motherhood continue to be intertwined with sociocultural ideas about race, class, and citizenship, and scholars have pointed to ways in which nonwhite women have had to put in extra work to claim legitimacy as mothers in order to gain authority in the public sphere. For example, Killen (2019) contends that the ability of the Mothers of the Movement, a group of Black women whose children were killed by the police, to leverage maternal discourses is dependent on various performative declarations and acts. They must “play the role of the ‘good mother’ and embody specific features of motherhood designated as valuable by dominant systems of power and pertaining largely to white women” (Killen, 2019, p. 624). Such examples reveal that the “double bind” is further complicated for nonwhite women who invoke feminized or maternal identities in their activism, a point that will remain highly relevant in the following section.

Next, I explore the “double bind” in relation to maternalist framing and environmental activism. Women toxic waste activists and environmental justice advocates, for example, have frequently invoked maternal and caretaking identities in order to bring attention to contamination issues. Yet maternal discourse has been turned against them in many cases; government and industry actors have used negative cultural beliefs about mothers and women as irrational and unscientific to overlook their contributions or to dismiss their concerns about the links between toxic exposure and adverse health outcomes.

#### 4 | MATERNALIST FRAMING AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Scholars and activists have theorized the intersection between gender and the environment for decades (Dzialo & Kennedy, 2015). This nexus is perhaps most prominent in the discourse of ecofeminism, which draws parallels between the domination of women by men in a patriarchal society and the human domination of nature. Such discourse was explicitly present, for example, in the historically robust women’s antinuclear movement in which nuclear power was depicted as symbolizing the violence of a male-dominated, patriarchal, and materialist society (Nelkin, 1981). Similarly, reproductive justice activists have long drawn connections between feminist and environmental agendas, holding the view that “all environmental issues are reproductive issues” (Di Chiro, 2008). The concept of environmental reproductive justice, coined by Mohawk midwife Katsi Cook, has emerged as a framework at the intersection of environmental justice and reproductive justice, shedding light on the intersecting impacts of environmental contamination on women’s health, physical reproduction, and the survival of culture and language (Hoover, 2017). Indeed, women activists across time and space have recognized environmental struggles are essentially about protecting the necessities for sustaining daily life.

While the nature of women’s environmental leadership and activism has changed over time in various ways, there have been some marked continuities, including the use of motherhood as a mobilizing frame (McCammon et al., 2018). Indeed, motherhood figures prominently in the stories of women leaders of the modern antitoxics and environmental justice movements in the United States, particularly as an impetus to take action. Such was the case at Love Canal, New York, in the 1970s, where local mothers engaged in extensive and largely successful protest against the toxic waste that had been buried underneath their community. Organizing leader Lois Gibbs, a self-described “housewife who went to Washington,” was first prompted to act after her own and her neighbors’ children became ill (Newman, 2001).

Racial and ethnic minority women were particularly tasked with this work given their disproportionate exposure to environmental pollution and risk, a trend that became abundantly clear with the rise of the environmental justice movement (Mann, 2011). Around the same time as the Love Canal protests, Hazel Johnson was leading an effort to address the patterns of environmental racism facing her community on the South Side of Chicago, which also turned out to be built on top of land that had been used as a sewage farm and as an illegal dumping ground for polychlorinated biphenyl (Unger, 2012). A mother of seven, Johnson was largely galvanized by the cancer deaths of young children in her community. Motherhood and family concerns have been observed as an impetus for women’s environmental activism in many other instances, including in the coalfields of

Appalachia (S. E. Bell & Braun, 2010); among Black women environmental justice activists in Atlanta, Georgia (Gomez et al., 2011); or in the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne (Hoover, 2017; LaDuke, 1999).

The theme of motherhood also figures prominently in the narratives of environmental justice leaders in the way they encourage other women to join the cause. Such is the case in *Empowering Ourselves: Women and Toxics Organizing*, a text that was published after the Women in Toxics Organizing Conference of November 1987. Meant to be a manual for other local leaders and activists, the publication includes the testimonials of notable female environmental justice activists and other anonymous women's voices. In analyzing this text, communication scholars Peeples and DeLuca (2006) argue that the authors present a transformed notion of motherhood that involves engaging in activities outside the home and challenging the entities that threaten their children; their notion of a "good mother" "ennoble[s] militant behavior that they establish as necessary to protect the community" (p. 81). Peeples and DeLuca suggest that the maternal frame in these contexts may be most useful in motivating and empowering others within the same constituency, building collective identity, and in facilitating coalition building. However, they join others (Petit, 2001; West & Blumberg, 1990) in cautioning that the use of maternal rhetoric is not free from constraints in the public sphere.

Indeed, the discourse of motherhood can be turned against women toxic waste activists. Industry and government often use negative cultural beliefs about mothers and women as irrational and unscientific to dismiss their concerns about the links between toxic exposure and adverse health outcomes (Brown & Ferguson, 1995). A female antinuclear activist at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant recounted the highly condescending attitude that Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials displayed towards her and other activists during meetings: "I mean it was like...[mimicking] mommies...We have everything under control. You go home and bake your cookies and go to your PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] meetings" (Culley & Angelique, 2003, p. 452). The term "hysterical housewives," a phrase first used by state officials and the media to characterize Lois Gibbs and the other women at Love Canal, excludes women activists from the rationality associated with the public sphere and depicts them as overly emotional to the point of hysteria (Kurtz, 2007). As Brown and Ferguson (1995, p. 161) argue, this view of women exemplifies a form of oppression that was historically used to "psychopathologize women for their particular forms of experience and perception." Government authorities and industry experts employ such rhetoric as justification not to take activists' claims seriously.

More recent examples reveal that the tendency for authorities to dismiss women and mothers as hysterical remains remarkably persistent across time and space. In *Radiation Brain Moms and Citizen Scientists*, Kimura (2016) finds disturbingly similar themes in the context of widespread food policing, or the "censoring of people's concerns about food safety in the name of science, risk analysis, and economy" (p. 5), in Japan following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident of 2011. As Kimura explains, anyone who changed their food consumption behavior on the basis of radiation contamination concerns was seen to be spreading harmful rumors and contributing to economic damages. Government authorities, food producers, mainstream media, and laypeople alike depicted such behavior



as unscientific and discriminatory toward farmers in affected areas. Both implicitly and explicitly, such discourse disproportionately targeted women, who were found to be more concerned about food safety and were more likely to shoulder food-related tasks in the household. Instead of being praised for their maternal dedication to providing safe and healthy food for their families, Kimura explains, mothers who expressed concern about radiation were chastised as irrational and shameful, widely labeled *n -mama* (radiation brain moms) on social media platforms.

In the context of environmental contamination episodes, the duties associated with motherhood can also be mobilized by authority figures in a way that disadvantages women. For example, when state-recommended remediation schemes focus on housecleaning as a way to reduce exposures, the burden of responsibility unsurprisingly lands on women; the individualization of risk management contributes to the manipulation of maternal identities in a way that serves industry interests. Bryson et al. (2001) explore such a case in the context of three highly contaminated Australian lead smelter towns, where state health authorities focused not on stopping contamination at its source, but rather emphasized the importance of rigorous housecleaning regimes in reducing child exposure to lead particles. Such recommendations placed a disproportionate weight of responsibility on women, in this case in working-class households, through the exploitation of their unpaid labor and sense of maternal responsibility (Bryson et al., 2001). This is an example of what Carreon and Moghadam (2015) would classify as *maternalism-from-above*, or the deployment of maternalist frames by the state/government or military power that may serve patriarchal purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Such examples reveal the complexity of maternalist politics in the context of environmental activism. On one hand, motherhood has served as a strong source of internal motivation for women to take action. It has also served as an effective basis upon which to build collective identity and create alliances. Yet, on the other hand, we see that government and industry actors have used negative cultural beliefs about women and mothers to delegitimize and denigrate their contributions, or have invoked a narrative of maternal responsibility to push forth an individualized plan for exposure reduction. In the following section, I will argue that while the maternal identity has historically served as a powerful mobilizing frame in environmental activism, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement, along with increasing salience of neoliberal models of mothering and childhood, means that structures of motherhood and femininity are being mobilized in such a way that places the burden of environmental risk management disproportionately on women.

## 5 | ENVIRONMENTAL RISK MANAGEMENT AS THE THIRD SHIFT

Feminist literature has long demonstrated that care work is culturally understood as feminine and that women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid care work within the family. As Hochschild (1989) highlighted in *The Second Shift*, women continue to shoulder the majority of housework even in dual-earner households; this creates a “second shift” for

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<sup>2</sup>Conversely, maternalism-from-below refers to the invocation of maternalist frames and forms of mobilization by actors that are not affiliated with state, government, or military power. This kind of mobilization is largely focused on egalitarian goals and grassroots empowerment, but it is also at risk of being co-opted by conservative groups and interests.

women who have families and also work outside the home, a trend that has persisted in more recent years. Neoliberal cuts in social services tend to increase care burdens for women, adding to their responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and other family members. Moreover, under increasingly salient neoliberal constructions of mothering and childhood, mothers are positioned as individually responsible for the health and well-being of their children (Zivkovic et al., 2010). This responsibility increasingly includes the work of protecting children from environmental threats. This narrative of responsibility can even be perpetuated by the very actors advocating for systemic change, as MacKendrick and Cairns (2019) found upon examining advocacy materials published between 1992 and 2016 by the Environmental Working Group, a prominent environmental health advocacy group. They argue that environmental health advocacy discourse often “locates *blame* for the polluted child within regulatory failure but locates the risk of such pollution in and around the maternal body and, accordingly, puts *responsibility* for action in women’s hands” (p. 312).

The act of “precautionary consumption,” or the effort to minimize exposure to environmental chemicals through careful consumption of nontoxic or “green” products and food, is a form of gendered labor that mothers increasingly feel responsible to take upon themselves in order to protect their children’s health (MacKendrick, 2014). Cairns et al. (2013) similarly points out that ethical food discourse, in pushing forth the ideal of the “organic child,” is another example of the way in which the sphere of maternal social and environmental responsibility is expanding. Under this ideology of motherhood, a child who has been exposed to environmental risk serves as a sign of failed mothering.

The whole structure of precautionary consumption as a protection strategy is problematic in part because it is not accessible to all. Through her interviews with 25 mothers from a range of class positions in Toronto, Canada, MacKendrick (2014) found that while this additional form of “responsible mothering” provides some women with a sense of agency and control over their children’s exposures, it marginalizes others who lack the time, financial resources, and familial stability. Importantly, women with fewer resources who lack neighborhood-level access to “green” commodities, and have fewer opportunities to develop environmental health literacy, are increasingly “pushed to the margins of normative motherhood” (p. 705).

Such dynamics are at play not only in the realm of precautionary consumption, but also in household-level proenvironmental behavior (such as “green” consumerism, recycling, saving water, and reducing energy consumption). As argued by Sandilands (1993), “if environmentalism is increasingly seen as household behavior, then it is women’s lives that come under the most intense scrutiny as the new private ecological morality comes into focus” (p. 46). One study found that within sustainable households in Australia, women tend to spend more time on proenvironmental behavior and do so more frequently, while men contribute in longer blocks of time through activities that can be seen as leisure (Organo et al., 2013). This gender difference in proenvironmental behavior has been observed cross-nationally (Dzialo, 2017). Yet this gender gap has rarely been treated as problematic by environmental sociologists, and is not conceptualized as another example of women’s unpaid labor (Kennedy & Kmec, 2018).

I argue that women's disproportionate burden of environmental risk mitigation and proenvironmental behavior within the household should indeed be seen as a significant additional form of unpaid labor that constitutes a component of the "third shift." Importantly, such work requires a considerable amount of emotional labor, in that women must not only navigate conflicting streams of information when making consumption choices, but must also engage in the emotional work of meeting these increased expectations of "good mothering" without appearing excessively anxious. Precautionary consumption and the mitigation of environmental health risks can be linked to women's self-evaluation of maternal competence, which may also lead to stress, anxiety, and guilt (Cairns et al., 2013). The third shift is thus precarious and unsustainable, as the practical and emotional difficulties of engaging in everyday precaution may lead to fatigue and a gradual decrease in health protective behaviors. Given the increase in care demands under neoliberalism, women may find it increasingly difficult to take on the extra work of precautionary consumption or proenvironmental household behavior to begin with, leaving them, their families, and the environment less protected.

More importantly, it limits women's engagement in other forms of environmental advocacy and leadership—the kind of work that would contribute to systemic change and regulatory protections for human health and the environment. This is concerning given the significance of women's environmental leadership. In a cross-national study, Norgaard and York (2005) found that, when women are poorly represented in government, fewer environmental treaties are ratified than when they make up a higher percentage of elected representatives.

Such concerns are not limited to the realm of environmental health threats. Scholars studying women's climate change vulnerability have pointed to the ways in which gendered expectations for care work can put women in situations that may endanger their health and well-being. Elderly women, for instance, are often still expected to perform housework, a task that may be particularly strenuous on excessively hot days (Bjornberg & Hansson, 2013). Women also shoulder a disproportionate burden of caring for the sick, both in professional and private roles; thus, women will be more burdened by the rise in illness or injury that may occur following extreme climate-related weather events (Lambrou & Piana, 2006). In disaster scenarios, women are more likely to delay their evacuation so that they can help care for children and the elderly, a phenomenon that can also be attributed to gendered expectations for care work (Alston, 2007). Once again, such burdens leave women increasingly saddled with household responsibility, limiting their environmental engagement in the public arena.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

While the history of American environmentalism is often depicted as one led by and dominated by middle-class white men, scholars have increasingly called attention to the ways that race, class, and gender relations have shaped environmental behavior and activism over time. During the early movement for environmental reform in the decades around 1900, middle-class women provided invaluable grassroots support to the various environmental causes, including resource conservation, wilderness preservation, antipollution, and urban beautification (Merchant, 1984). With the rise of the modern environmental justice

movement, women's leadership became even more predominant and conspicuous, as women were often the first to notice the environmental ills that were encroaching on the spaces where their families and communities would live, work, and play. Racial and ethnic minority women were particularly tasked with this work given their disproportionate exposure to environmental pollution and risk (Gomez et al., 2011). While the nature of women's environmental leadership and activism has changed over time in various ways, there have been some marked continuities, including the use of motherhood as a mobilizing frame (McCammon et al., 2018). Indeed, women toxic waste activists have frequently invoked maternal and caretaking identities in order to bring attention to contamination issues (Brown & Ferguson, 1995).

Yet today's calls on individuals to simultaneously engage in proenvironmental behavior and to protect themselves from environmental threats through consumption have mobilized maternal discourse in a way that shifts focus away from community protection and stopping pollution at its source (Sandilands, 1993). Indeed, the increasing individualization of the environmental movement is intersecting with persistent, unequal gendered structures of labor in a way that places the burden of environmental risk management on women and mothers. Such dynamics are only exacerbated by the increase in care demands under neoliberalism. I argue that precautionary consumption and other forms of individualized environmental risk management add to the "third shift," which is concerning because it has the potential to limit women's involvement in other forms of environmental advocacy and leadership.

Emerging research also suggests that such dynamics may reproduce gender inequalities not only between men and women but also *among* women of different levels of race and class privilege, given varied levels of access to time and resources to engage in precautionary behavior. Future research should thus further investigate the ways in which the increasing individualization of the environmental movement also exacerbates environmental injustice at the household level. As argued by Kennedy and Kmec (2018), researchers should pay closer attention to how differences in proenvironmental behavior affects women's outcomes more broadly with regard to social and economic status. The same line of inquiry applies to precautionary consumption and other forms of environmental risk management. Building on the work of MacKendrick and Cairns (2019), future research should also examine how maternal discourses are mobilized by environmental social movement organizations, and the extent to which such actors may be inadvertently contributing to the reproduction of household-level gender inequality. Finally, the extent to which precautionary behavior and consumption is sustainable in both the short- and long-term warrants further attention, as does the question of whether the associated emotional labor and fatigue lead to a decrease in such health-protective and proenvironmental behavior overall.

Another important area of future research concerns the social barriers to men's environmental engagement and proenvironmental behavior. While men can often be found in top positions in larger, more formalized environmental social movement organizations, they have not been at the forefront when it comes to localized environmental justice struggles and household level proenvironmental behavior or precautionary consumption. Indeed, consumer researchers have found that both male and female consumers associate "green" behavior

with femininity, which may lead men to avoid proenvironmental behavior for the sake of gender-identity maintenance (Brough et al., 2016). Scholars have theorized this dynamic in relation to the proenvironmental lifestyle choices of vegetarianism and veganism, for example, observing that men may be more reluctant to stop their meat consumption given its significance as a masculine behavior (Nath, 2010; Sobal, 2005).

Yet, as argued by Wetherell and Edley (1999), men can embrace and enact hegemonic masculine norms at times but can also strategically distance themselves from such norms at other moments. Studies on this topic in relation to environmental engagement are limited; Connell (1990) explored the life histories of a group of men who attempted to “reform” their masculinity through their experiences in environmental activism. S. E. Bell and Braun (2010) further point out that the small handful of men in Central Appalachia who joined the local environmental justice movement were able to disassociate themselves from the local conception of masculinity through certain life events and circumstances, drawing instead from identities that were more closely aligned with the protective and mothering identities of the coalfield women activists. Thus, it is important to examine what circumstances and life experiences allow men to distance themselves from hegemonic masculine norms to the extent that they are able to pursue proenvironmental activism and lifestyles.

In any case, there is much room for more critical gender-environment theorizing. As climate change and everyday toxic exposure present increasingly ubiquitous threats, we must continue to think critically about solutions that shift the burden of dealing with these threats onto individuals—especially women. Past research has repeatedly demonstrated that women undertake more household-level proenvironmental behavior as well as environmental risk management, but has largely stopped short of exploring the reasons for and the consequences of these gender differences (Kennedy & Kmec, 2018). In so doing, it remains complicit in the normalization of the gendered division of labor, and fails to identify such behavior as an additional form of unpaid and undervalued work. A feminist lens is crucial in turning our attention to the way in which household-level environmental engagement may exacerbate gender inequality, and in further investigating the relationship between inequality and environmental protection more broadly.

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