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Moms for Liberty and the Legacy of White Maternalist Activism

Gender Power and Cultural Organizing in Far-Right Movements

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Abstract: *Through an analysis of Moms for Liberty’s rhetoric and organizing strategies, this article situates the group’s “parental rights” advocacy within a broader historical framework. I define a white maternalist political tradition that connects Moms for Liberty to twentieth-century maternalist groups, demonstrating how the organization reproduces strategies developed by activists who, from the 1950s through the 1980s, portrayed “communism” and “secular humanism” as creeping threats to children and violations of parental rights. Like its predecessors, Moms for Liberty claims that children are being indoctrinated—now by a sinister “woke” ideology allegedly infiltrating schools across the nation. I argue that white maternalist groups organizing around education consistently employ three strategies: 1) suturing a range of progressive causes into a single, conspiratorial container of threat; 2) mobilizing grassroots maternal surveillance to identify and uproot those threats within local schools and communities; and 3) engaging in cultural organizing that reproduces the nuclear family and weaponizes motherhood as a source of moral—and ostensibly apolitical—authority. By presenting themselves not as political actors but as concerned mothers, these activists recast efforts to preserve racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies as a brave and selfless defense of home and family. Tracing these continuities across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries denaturalizes the rhetorics of apolitical motherhood and child protection that propel these movements, demonstrating instead that these rhetorics are political tools through which far-right activists advance their agendas.*

Keywords: maternalism, Moms for Liberty, anti-communism, far-right organizing, parental rights

Moms for Liberty (MFL) is an extremist “parental rights” group that unites under the slogan “we do NOT co-parent with the government” (Miller and Kieffer 2022).¹ The group initially formed to oppose COVID-era education policies such as

1 The Southern Poverty Law Center designated MFL an extremist anti-government group in 2023. See

school closures, masking in schools, vaccine mandates, and mandatory testing, gaining national attention (and an eventual FBI probe) for its disruptive presence at school board meetings nationwide (Craig 2021). The group's official narrative is that its members "woke up" during the pandemic, claiming that remote learning allowed them to "see behind the education curtain" and realize that their children were being indoctrinated and "groomed" into progressive ideologies. After 2021, the group's activism evolved into advocacy against what it calls "woke indoctrination" within the education system. MFL organizes this opposition into six main issue areas: what it calls critical race theory, social emotional learning, sex education, restorative justice, gender ideology, and "porn" in libraries. Describing themselves as "Mama Bears" and "Joyful Warriors," members claim they fight for a lost right to direct the upbringing of their children. MFL is simultaneously local and national, with a national office facilitating the efforts of local chapters within states. As of February 2024, the organization had 310 chapters across forty-eight states (Perry 2024). The group has built a powerful grassroots network, mobilizing thousands of mothers to run for school boards and monitor classrooms for "woke indoctrination."

Since the group's founding in 2021, MFL's policy demands have been translated into law across the nation. As of October 2024, twenty-one states had passed bans on the teaching of "divisive concepts," such as those dealing with race, gender, and sexuality within K–12 education (PEN America 2024b). And, as of July 2025, sixteen states had passed twenty-two laws censoring discussions of "divisive concepts" or "diversity, equity, and inclusion" within higher education (Benitez et al. 2025). These bills have been a primary policy objective for MFL, which insists that "woke education" caused the progressive protest movements of the 2010s and early 2020s by brainwashing young people and turning them against the United States. In addition, MFL has worked to ban library books and school texts about race, gender, and sexuality. As of November 2024, PEN America (2023, 2024a) had tracked 15,940 book bans across forty-three states, 58 percent of which were tied to MFL in 2023. MFL has also championed policies restricting the rights of transgender youth. As of July 2025, twenty-seven states had enacted bans on gender-affirming care for minors, nineteen states had passed bans on trans people using the bathroom aligned with their gender identity, and twenty-seven states had barred trans youth from participating in school sports (HRC Foundation 2025; Redfield 2025; Yurcaba 2025). MFL also led a successful legal challenge to Joe Biden's trans-inclusive Title IX reforms, leading to the reforms being blocked in any school or district where an MFL member's child attended (Walsh 2024).

The group has further acted as a critical force in the second Trump administration's governing strategy. The Associated Press reported that the Trump administration "embraces and amplifies [Moms for Liberty's] message, launching the group into a

"Moms for Liberty," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/extremist-files/moms-liberty/>.

new level of influence on public policy” (Binkley 2026). Tina Descovich, the group’s current leader, claimed to have attended about twelve White House events, stating, “We have a seat at the table in so many policy discussions throughout the administration” (Binkley 2026). Moms for Liberty members, leaders, and their children have been guests at the signing of executive orders that actualize the group’s agenda. Twenty MFL members and their daughters attended the signing of Trump’s “Keeping Men Out of Women’s Sports” executive order, for instance (Dashiell and Smith 2025). And Trump has taken up the group’s long-standing grievance with the Southern Poverty Law Center: Descovich co-wrote an August 2025 letter urging federal agencies to stop using Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) research. The FBI severed ties with the organization two months later, “echoing language from [her] letter” (Binkley 2026). The Justice Department subsequently indicted the SPLC on fraud charges, which MFL claimed as a victory for its longstanding campaign against the organization.²

And, finally, MFL has reshaped the structure of education in America by building political support for school privatization, using its national platform to promote vouchers and other forms of private school choice as alternatives to the “indoctrination” in public schools (Stewart 2025). This agenda gained federal force through Trump’s January 2025 executive order “Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunity for Families,” which directed federal agencies to identify ways of supporting private, religious, charter, and home-based education with federal funds (Trump 2025a). Two months later, Trump issued “Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities,” partially actualizing MFL’s longstanding demand to abolish the Department of Education (MFL leaders attended its signing) (Trump 2025b; Montesano 2025). Congress further advanced this agenda in July 2025 by establishing the nation’s first voucher-style federal tax-credit scholarship program, which uses federal tax credits to incentivize donations to organizations that provide families with scholarships for private-school tuition and other educational expenses (Anderson 2025). MFL has thus successfully transformed opposition to “woke indoctrination” into grassroots support for policies that redirect public funds toward private and religious education (Cunningham 2024).

The group’s abrupt trajectory from outsider activist group to the center of the contemporary right’s governing strategy makes it crucial to understand how MFL so rapidly achieved its political and policy success. In order to better understand MFL’s path to political power, this article places its activism in historical context by examining how the group’s strategies mirror the work of twentieth-century maternalist activists in American education. By refiguring progressive reforms around LGBTQ inclusion and racial justice as forms of “brainwashing,” MFL opened a new salvo in the long-standing

2 See “Breaking! SPLC Exposed,” Moms for Liberty, accessed September 4, 2026, <https://www.momsforliberty.org/splc/>.

educational battles that Zimmerman (2022) terms the “culture wars” in American education.

Pulling from a range of secondary sources that detail twentieth-century maternalist crusades against “communism” and “secular humanism” in education, I define the tradition that unites MFL with its predecessors as a *white maternalist political tradition*. In the article’s three sections, I define three elements of this tradition: 1) maternalist groups suture together a variety of progressive issue areas into one container of threat; 2) they work to uproot this threat by surveilling local communities for any evidence of progressive ideologies in education; and 3) they engage in cultural organizing that (re)creates the “traditional” right-wing nuclear family through political performance. By leveraging the moral authority of motherhood to resist progressive changes in education, maternalist activists cast movements for racial and gender justice as insidious plots to manipulate children and undermine the nuclear family.

Each era of maternalist activism I examine followed a period of highly visible progressive reform, forming a reactive countermovement that sought to preserve white supremacist, heteropatriarchal hierarchies in response to social change. In the 1950s, white maternalists responded to New Deal social welfare programs, the creation of the United Nations, and the desegregation of schools by figuring these changes as examples of a creeping form of communism that threatened to infect the minds of schoolchildren and, eventually, rot America from the inside. In the 1970s, activists characterized movements for gender justice, civil rights, and queer liberation as insidious forms of “secular humanism” that had uprooted Christian education and threatened to atrophy the moral development of children. In our day, MFL responds to the growing acceptance and mainstreaming of LGBTQ people—alongside the Black Lives Matter movement and the racial justice protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd—by insisting that these movements happened because of “woke” indoctrination in the nation’s schools. By casting progressivism as either educational indoctrination itself or the eventual result of educational indoctrination, white maternalists have continually shifted the national conversation from structural injustices to the supposed manipulation of innocent children. I thus define the white maternalist political tradition as an enduring ideological framework that transforms reactionary politics into a defense of children, family, and nation.

I focus on defining a white maternalist political tradition rather than on women’s roles in right-wing politics to emphasize that motherhood is the authorizing force of this activism. The term “maternalism” is broader than the subject position of “mother,” referring both to this subject position *and* to a particular political ideology about motherhood itself. The term “maternalism” works to draw attention to a specific political performance of motherhood that translates the authority of the domestic into the political sphere. For right-wing women, motherhood is more than identity: It is a subject position that authorizes political speech, naturalizes power over child and family, and lays claim to a timeless and incontestable moral authority. Within the

political hierarchy of the Christian nuclear family—which, under Christian nationalism, represents a model for the political hierarchy of the nation as a whole—the mother has a powerful and authoritative role, subordinate to the patriarch but in control of home, family, and children (Bjork-James 2020). Nickerson (2012), McRae (2018), Kintz (1997), and Benowitz (2015) demonstrate that right-wing women have long drawn on these ideas to argue that, as mothers, they need to step into public activism to protect their children. White maternalism thus transforms women's apparent subordination within the patriarchal family into a source of political authority, allowing them to claim power in the public sphere precisely through their responsibility for home and children.

I refer to this activist tradition as *white* maternalism to draw attention to the fact that maternalist movements have widely disparate histories. While right-wing maternalist movements have worked to reinscribe racial and gender hierarchies, maternalism has also been invoked in support of movements for civil rights and economic justice (Bracewell and Daily 2024). I thus use *white maternalism* to draw attention to the fact that gender is inextricable from race and class: The white maternalists I write about fought for a specific constellation of gendered, racialized, and classed privileges, not for “motherhood” alone. Their activism was rooted in culturally white, female, and upper-middle-class domestic spaces. I also use *white* not to describe activists' individual racial identities but rather to name maternalists' investment in white supremacist politics—even as the form and content of these politics has shifted across historical contexts. And, while white maternalism has a history that extends far beyond the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I limit my discussion to the post–World War II period because scholars identify the maternalist grassroots activism of this period as a critical force that constructed the family-values politics of the US “New Right,” which still holds political power today (Dowland 2015, 10; McGirr 2015; Klatch 1988).

When I define white maternalism as a “political tradition,” I mean the repertoire of rhetorics, organizing tactics, and political performances that connect MFL with maternalist groups of the past. The term “political tradition” does not necessarily mean that MFL members have intentionally studied the activist strategies of previous groups to consciously replicate them. When I conducted informal interviews with members of MFL at national summits in 2022, 2023, and 2024, most women I spoke with identified themselves as apolitical wives and mothers. Claiming that they had little previous political experience or historical knowledge, they told me they were responding to active threats against their children. While I was not able to interview the leadership of the organization, I closely examined their rhetoric across public events, speeches, and MFL's *Joyful Warriors* podcast, and likewise found no indication that they were aware of how forcefully their movement repeats history. A limitation of this article is thus that it does not ask or answer whether Moms for Liberty members themselves “know” the histories of their own activist tradition. I thus use the word “tradition” in place of “political strategy” because traditions are not always consciously studied and deliberately replicated. Instead, they endure as inherited ways of doing and thinking that feel natural or self-evident, the way things have always been done. I demonstrate

how the white maternalist political tradition draws from a deeply sedimented cultural association between white motherhood, child protection, and defense of social order, which, for white maternalist activists, is urgent and deeply felt.

This article employs a mixed-methods, comparative approach that juxtaposes secondary historical sources with ethnographic detail from my own participant observation at MFL's public-facing recruitment and training events. To make my arguments about maternalist activists of the twentieth century, I draw from a number of secondary sources that detail the history of right-wing women's activism. Following Beatty (2025, 54), I focus on the "recurring patterns and themes [that] are clearly visible across different pieces of . . . archival material," working to identify common patterns that appear both throughout historical sources and the contemporary activism I observed. In approaching these histories by analyzing the commonalities between MFL and its predecessors, I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive, linear history of activism across decades. Each maternalist group, each decade of activism, and each political project—alongside how they influenced one another—merits an article or book. The purpose of this article is instead to define the political tradition that unites them. Another limitation of this article is thus that, because it works toward a broad synthesis of activism happening across the country, it necessarily elides important differences between maternalist groups and time periods.

To make my arguments about MFL, I draw from my participant observation at MFL's public-facing summits, training events for new members, and events by local chapters, which I conducted between June 2022 and September 2024. On the national level, I attended each of MFL's four-day summits in July 2022, July 2023, and August 2024, as well as an array of online trainings offered by the national organization. On the local level, I attended a year-long event series called the 2022–2023 School Year for Parents (SYP) put on by the Williamson County, Tennessee, chapter of MFL, plus local events in several states. For a full list of the MFL events I attended, see the appendix. In addition to the listed events, I listened to all episodes of MFL's *Joyful Warriors* podcast (hosted by Tiffany Justice) released between November 5, 2021, and August 12, 2024. Only the episodes I quote from are listed in the bibliography.

Defining Threat: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century

A critical aspect of the white maternalist tradition is its ability to leverage the racialized and gendered authority of white motherhood to frame discriminatory politics not as oppression but as protection of children against dangerous, subversive ideas. Each era of maternalist activism has responded to progressive change by redefining the accomplishments of progressive movements as dangerous forms of educational indoctrination. Maternalist activists in the 1950s responded to the reforms of the New Deal, desegregation, and the creation of the United Nations with conspiratorial charges of "communist" indoctrination. Likewise, right-wing women in the 1960s and 1970s

responded to campaigns for civil rights, queer liberation, and women's rights by casting these movements as forms of "secular humanism" that had infiltrated schools and eroded children's home-taught morals. In recent years, Moms for Liberty has responded to feminist, LGBTQ, and racial justice movements by depicting queer-inclusive policies and accurate historical education as forms of "woke indoctrination." Across these decades, white maternalist activists have developed a durable political grammar that has allowed them to bundle together disparate social movements into a singular threat. And, by claiming to fight "communism," "secular humanism," or "wokeness," white maternalist movements have developed a vocabulary to articulate their opposition to social justice movements that allows them to avoid directly expressing discriminatory ideologies.

In the 1950s and 1960s, maternalist activists across the United States launched a wave of anti-communist organizing centered on rooting out ideological subversion in K–12 schools (McRae 2018; Nickerson 2012; Benowitz 2015; Critchlow 2005). They argued that communism had infiltrated the education system and threatened to weaken America from the inside—and that they, as mothers, were uniquely situated to expose and destroy it. Maternalist activists across the country raised the alarm with articles such as the *American Legion Magazine's* "Your Child Is Their Target," (1952), books such as *The Devil's Advocate* (1952), *School of Darkness* (1954), and *Education or Indoctrination?* (1955), and pamphlets with titles like *What's Happened to Our Schools?* (1956). These works detailed how subversive educators were using schools to create a new social order by manipulating children into collectivist mentalities (Benowitz 2009, 105, 107, 108). Emergent and existing women's organizations—such as Women for America, Minute Women (a play on "minutemen"), Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), and National Association of Pro America—called their vast member bases into action, asking them to take action to root out the communist threat in their local communities (Benowitz 2009; Nickerson 2012; McRae 2018, 146). Activists mobilized en masse to conduct ideological investigations of the nation's schools, searching for the faintest hint of subversion across textbooks and other classroom materials.

Historians argue that white maternalists' hunt for so-called communist indoctrination within the education system functioned as a code for white supremacist ideology, providing a seemingly neutral, nondiscriminatory language through which to articulate racial grievances. Nickerson (2012, 18) calls maternalist anti-communist activism "a common anticommunist discourse of protest against the civil rights movement," highlighting that such activism was powerful precisely because it translated explicitly segregationist or racist agendas into the more socially acceptable language of patriotism and child protection. McRae (2018, 13) likewise notes that the anti-communist crusade allowed white maternalist activists to "construct black activism as the result of outside agitation and infiltration, not home-grown organic political organizing." And McGirr (2015, 184) observes that these movements articulated Black liberation movements as "part of a communist plot to foster disorder." Frames like these presented civil rights movements, particularly for the integration of schools and curricula, as forms of foreign infiltration that threatened national security. By contrast, white maternalist activists

depicted themselves as the rightful guardians of the nation who could protect national values against these “outside agitators.” Translating demands for Black liberation into the language of communist infiltration thus offered white women a socially legible—and seemingly patriotic—way to defend white supremacist policies.

By the 1970s, the maternalist language of anti-communism gave way to warnings about “secular humanism,” a capacious framework that allowed activists to bundle together anxieties about feminism, civil rights, queer liberation, and student antiwar protest under the guise of protecting children’s moral development (Laats 2015, 205; Mason 2009, 104). Whereas “communism” in K–12 education was said to manipulate children into embracing collectivist ideologies, a relativistic secular humanism was said to erode young people’s sense of absolute right and wrong—encouraging them to question parental authority, accept “immoral” lifestyles, and adopt a worldview detached from God and country (Dowland 2015, 24). As McGirr (2015, 226) explains:

These new issues expressed the same general concerns over moral corruption and traditional values that previously had been subsumed under the rubric of anticommunism. . . . [V]arious forms of “domestic corruption”—obscenity, sex education, abortion, and, by the late 1970s, an ever more assertive gay liberation movement—became the new targets of attack. And the enemy responsible for such ills was no longer an international, public, and political opponent, but the secular humanists in one’s own community.

As with communist indoctrination, secular humanist indoctrination did not just refer to secular humanist philosophies themselves, instead acting as a coded referent that combined social movements for civil rights, queer liberation, and women’s rights into a singular threat, allowing maternalist movements to respond to these movements as one entity. While their political vocabulary may have shifted, the general strategy stayed the same: Maternalist activists used charges of indoctrination to explain away emergent social movements in the 1960s and the 1970s, hoping that control over school curricula would allow them to blunt progressive change and preserve existing racial and gender hierarchies.

Both the 1974 textbook controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia, and Anita Bryant’s 1977 Save Our Children campaign in Miami, Florida, reveal how white maternalist activists strategically disguised racial and sexual grievances in the language of child protection. During the Kanawha County textbook controversy, white maternalist activists led by Alice Moore organized mass protests against new curricular literature they claimed promoted secular humanism and undermined Christian and parental authority. Histories of the movement, however, have revealed that parents were primarily responding to a state mandate that required multicultural literature in school, mandates around school integration and bussing, and subsequent anxieties about miscegenation and racial mixing (Mason 2005, 366). Likewise, Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign

galvanized white mothers against a Dade County ordinance that would have banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, thus allowing openly queer teachers to teach in public schools. Insisting that “God gave mothers the divine right to reproduce and a divine commission to protect our children, in our homes, business, and especially our schools,” Bryant advocated for “[t]he civil rights of parents: to save their children from homosexual influence” (Frank 2013, 127). As Bryant’s rhetoric demonstrates, this campaign rearticulated political organizing working to secure the oppression of queer people as an effort to protect children and parental rights.

It is essential to note that these maternalist activists fought for not all children but for the perceived interests of white, middle-class, cisgender, and straight children. As Rand (2025, 15) argues, “the figure of the child is deployed to the detriment of actual children—to constrain the possibilities of public deliberation, to reinforce white supremacy and cis- and heteronormativity, to restrict the agency of youth.” Children of color and queer children stood to benefit from policies like school integration, inclusive textbooks, and nondiscrimination ordinances against queer teachers. The rhetoric of child protection thus did not serve the interests of children broadly but rather the preservation of a particular social order privileging white, cisgender, Christian, and heterosexual families.

The evolving transformation of what constituted the “indoctrination” of school children throughout the twentieth century demonstrates that maternalist movements forged a durable political tradition through which the specter of indoctrination could be regenerated to resist the work of social justice movements. Terms like communism and secular humanism allowed white maternalist activists to suture a wide array of progressive opponents into a cohesive and compelling threat to children, thus allowing maternalist activists to fight multiple issues at one time. These terms also offered maternalist activists a vocabulary of opposition against liberation movements that allowed them to express opposition to equal rights in politically acceptable terms. As I will demonstrate in the following section, maternalist activism continues to act as a powerful vehicle for resistance to progressive reforms.

Defining Threat: Moms for Liberty

Mirroring the strategies of maternalist groups of the twentieth century, MFL packages disparate forms of progressive change into a singular force: “wokeness.” The purpose of almost every MFL event I attended was to teach mothers about a form of woke indoctrination in schools and train them how to challenge it. The events I attended were almost exclusively educational sessions focused on six distinct ideologies that were said to be used to brainwash children: gender ideology, critical race theory, social emotional learning, restorative justice, porn in libraries, and critical sex education. Each of these issues offered a direct response to recent progressive policy wins in education. “Gender ideology,” for instance, retitled LGBTQIA-affirming policies in schools—

such as using the names and pronouns of trans students, allowing trans athletes to play sports, using queer- and trans-affirming curricular materials, and having openly queer or trans teachers—as sinister forms of indoctrination that worked to “trans” students and eventually “sterilize and mutilate” them through gender-affirming care. Programs integrating mental health care in schools became sneaky forms of “social emotional learning” that worked to turn students against their parents and brainwash them into collectivist mentalities. Reforms attempting to combat racially biased discipline policies and white-washed curricula were reframed as nefarious forms of “restorative justice” and “critical race theory” that would put white students in both physical and psychological danger, forcing them to feel guilty and preventing them from making connections with children of different races. The presence of school library books featuring queer or trans characters became age-inappropriate “porn in the libraries.”

Each panel I attended on these topics was framed as the exposure of a vast conspiracy. Speakers insisted that these programs had been inserted into schools by leftist elites as part of a broader effort to restructure the consciousness of the American people. Like the referents communism and secular humanism, “woke education” transfigured the grassroots work of social movements for racial, gender, and sexual justice into vast conspiratorial plots. As Bethany Mandel, an MFL chapter member, explained during an episode of the *Joyful Warriors* podcast, “they would like to foment a revolution, but they’re not having the next generation. They can’t indoctrinate their own children because they’re not having them. And so we’re the breeders, where this is like *Handmaid’s Tale*.” Mandel warned that “[t]hey’re trying to subvert our parenting decisions in our parenting, everything, by trying to capture our children. . . . They’re trying to capture them via the schools, via media. Even at their pediatrician’s office. . . . [T]he end goal is to create little foot soldiers in this woke revolution” (Justice 2023). Mandel’s warnings were repeated across countless events: This shadowy “they” was the reason for social justice movements. The “revolution” (i.e., progressive reforms) was not organic but instead a deliberate, top-down conspiracy.

While all of MFL’s issue areas were colloquially subsumed under the category of “woke education,” the group simultaneously evoked echoes of past fears of communism and secular humanism. For instance, Robin Steedman (the Williamson County, Tennessee, MFL chapter chair) coordinated a year-long event called the “School Year for Parents” (SYP), which each month taught about a different danger in the local schools. She explained that gender ideology, critical race theory, restorative justice, social emotional learning, “porn” in school libraries, generative curriculum,³ and critical sex education were the “six pillars of Marxist pedagogy.” As Steedman explained at the SYP’s May 2023 capstone “graduation” event, “Marxism in education is the strategy. That’s the strategic vision [that] has been going on for hundreds of years. The tactics

3 Rather than packaged and delivered from the top, generative curriculum is co-created through information provided by teachers, students, and local community members.

have changed, as we're very 2023. . . . Girls can be boys and boys can be girls." Steedman's argument here demonstrates how the bogeyman of "communist indoctrination" allows for new concerns to be folded into old ones. Steedman did not say that gender ideology ("girls can be boys") had *replaced* communist indoctrination but instead insisted that the "tactics have changed." Through arguments like these, newer concerns like gender ideology were layered onto older ones like communist indoctrination, adding to an ever-expanding sediment of grievance.

MFL's concerns about social emotional learning (SEL) also echo older concerns about secular humanism.⁴ Like the maternalist activists who crusaded against secular humanism in the 1970s, MFL events taught participants that SEL programs had replaced religious teachings, were designed to distance students from self and family, and would indoctrinate kids into progressive ideologies. As Deb Fillman, the group's primary trainer on SEL, put it during a breakout session at MFL's 2022 summit, schools are trying to "transform . . . the worldview of our children to this successor ideology" using SEL programs. According to Fillman, students "go in [to schools] as a little individual. And they're destabilized. It destabilizes them emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively . . . [s]o they'll passively accept this new world order." Whereas maternalist activists in the 1970s argued that secular humanism uprooted parental morals by teaching students about racial and gender equality, MFL panels warned that SEL was designed to make children psychologically vulnerable to "gender ideology" by teaching students to "question their individual perceptions of reality" and "attach new group labels to identify the self." As Fillman put it, "Have you known a lot of kids lately? [They're] saying, 'I have generalized anxiety disorder. Yes, I have gender dysphoria. I'm asexual.' You're *nine*. That's called being a child. . . . How could you possibly know that? Well, an adult put that idea in their head." Statements like these exemplified MFL's primary claim: When young people are queer, trans, aware of mental health, or supportive of racial justice, they cannot have come to these conclusions independently. They must have been brainwashed. Such statements further evoke a tenet of the group's politics—the idea that children are incapable of critical thought, mere putty in the hands of nefarious progressive educators.

MFL's framing of progressive educational policies as forms of "indoctrination" positioned queer, feminist, and racial justice movements as aggressors who threatened the physical and emotional wellbeing of a (presumptively white, straight, cis, and economically secure) child. And, just as maternalist activists of the twentieth century claimed that they were opposed to communism (*not* integration) or secular humanism (*not* multicultural textbooks), MFL members regularly insisted that their opposition to students learning about racial injustice or queer identities was about opposition to

4 SEL programs, which became increasingly popular in schools throughout the 2010s, attempt to help students develop nonacademic abilities like relationship skills, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making.

“wokeness,” *not* racism or homophobia. MFL’s insistence that critical race theory had invaded American schools, for instance, echoed earlier crusades against integrated textbooks, which insisted learning about histories of racial injustice would depress students and turn them against America and one another (Zimmerman 2022, 107). One mother described Tennessee’s Wit and Wisdom curricula as nothing but descriptions of “the evil White people [who] victimize the black people,” arguing that curricula that describe racial injustice had permanently damaged her son: “In his world, he’s colorblind. . . . [T]hose nine weeks have destroyed his world, his identity. He hates to be American . . . [because of] the evil act that happened in the past, done from somebody else that has nothing to do with him.”⁵ Claims like this furthered a central logic of white maternalist politics: the idea that learning about racial injustice harms white children. Sessions about “restorative justice” policies (adopted in many schools in an attempt to combat racially biased discipline policies) likewise argued that restorative justice allowed for chaos and disorder and, in many cases, led to school shootings.

Now as before, identifying social justice movements as sinister threats to children, parental rights, and American families allows MFL members to deflect accusations of hate or discrimination. As Vivek Ramaswamy joked with the crowd during his speech at the July 2023 summit, “I am here at . . . my favorite hate group in history that I am proud to join today. . . . It’s a hate group founded on the love of our children.” Or, as a New York chapter chair put it during a “We Don’t Stand Alone” webinar on January 18, 2023: “I’m a joyful warrior. I fight because this is a war. . . . And it’s not because you hate people. It’s because we care about our children and the future of our country.” As these examples demonstrate, MFL speakers and members repeatedly acknowledged accusations that they were a hate group, but rearticulated their work as love for children. And, like their predecessors, when MFL claimed that “children” are harmed by progressivism, they implicitly referred to a specific subset of privileged children. In reality, many children benefit from the types of inclusion programs that MFL targets: For example, queer and trans children benefit from queer- and trans-inclusive school policies, and children of color benefit from learning about their histories and from restorative justice programs that work to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

The term woke thus does much the same work that communism or secular humanism once did—it serves as a signifier that groups multiple social movements for racial, gender, and sexual liberation, allowing MFL to respond to them as a singular threat. These linkages mean that, once an activist arrives at an MFL event, they quickly learn to see not just one thing wrong with the school system but a host of interconnected issues to fight against. When activists are radicalized on one issue, they quickly become radicalized on issues like critical race theory, social emotional learning, and restorative

5 This quote is from the May 2022 “Critical Race Theory” SYP event.

justice. MFL's practice of suturing together progressive reforms into one container of threat is thus an effective way of pulling mothers with a single grievance into a broader, ideologically cohesive movement.

Uprooting Threat: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century

From the 1950s through the 1980s, maternalist social movements tasked mothers with decoding hidden threats in schools and uprooting anything that strayed from "traditional" education. These activists constructed an image of the American mother as a frontline soldier in an ideological battle for the nation's youth, framing progressive changes as sneaky forms of indoctrination. Though maternalist concerns shifted over time—from communism in the 1950s to secular humanism in the 1970s and 1980s—their methods did not. Coordinated reviews of textbooks, classroom materials, and curricula, along with the public exposure of anything deemed "subversive," remained central tactics. The next section shows how this legacy shapes MFL's contemporary strategies: portraying the education system as a site of hidden danger, "decoding" school materials, and targeting progressive teachers or institutions for surveillance and discipline.

Maternalist activists of the 1950s did not assume that communist indoctrination was easy to recognize, instead structuring their activism around the assumption that mothers would need to be trained to root it out. Many activist groups provided a far-reaching program of political education intended to empower mothers to recognize communism in any of its many guises. According to Critchlow (2005, 82), this "emphasis on education—[the] know thy enemy approach—was typical in the grassroots anticommunist movement. The aim was to train average Americans to recognize communist propaganda. . . . Anticommunist activists spent hours in study—much of it extremely academic." Phyllis Schlafly's early activism, for instance, involved designing an "anticommunist study program for small groups," which took place over the course of ten weeks and asked participants to read and study congressional documents about communism (81). By 1962, there were three thousand of these study groups in forty-eight states. Schlafly was a passionate advocate for mothers entering grassroots politics, stating in one of her speeches that "[c]ommunism can only be stopped by the individual actions of little people," and calling on mothers to become "a Freedom Fighter in your own sphere of influence. You, too, can do big things if you have faith and dedication" (82).

Once mothers learned to recognize the many guises of communism, the logic went, they could use their newfound knowledge to become agents of surveillance in communities throughout the country. Women's organizations achieved national reach by mobilizing their vast member bases to read, review, and report on materials within their local schools. Groups focused on reviewing textbooks for subversive materials and disseminating their findings across the nation. Lucille Crane, for

instance, started a publication called the *Educational Reviewer*, which reviewed school history textbooks for evidence of communist infiltration and publicized the findings (Benowitz 2009, 94). Review efforts were often highly coordinated: Groups used rubrics to systemically assess US textbooks and provided reviewers with lists of suspicious watchwords. During a study the DAR conducted between 1958 and 1959, members assessed whether young people were “emphatically taught love of God and Country” or were “being corrupted to accept socialism and materialism.” The DAR found that only one in five textbooks met their standards (Benowitz 2015, 51). School districts often used reviews like these to find “patriotic”—and hopefully noncontroversial—textbooks to adopt.

Activists’ ideological investigations focused not only on textbooks but on potentially subversive teachers, administrators, and other school reading materials. DAR chapters, for instance, regularly sent their members to inspect history classes in their local communities. In 1951, DAR leaders in Texas “bragged that 1,695 of its members had visited history classes to investigate teaching” (Laats 2015, 157). Similarly, DAR members in Colorado forced teachers and school officials to take loyalty oaths. The DAR made a point of reviewing not just history books but literature anthologies, math and science books, and even music texts. In one notorious incident, the DAR reviewed an anthology that featured a story about a squirrel that raided a birdhouse for nuts. Their review asked: “Have you ever heard or read about a more subtle way of undermining the American system of work and profit and replacing it with a collectivist welfare system? . . . Can you recall a socialistic idea more seductively presented to an innocent child?” (Zimmerman 2022, 96).

Missions like these gave mothers a special role in the grassroots fight against communism: Engaged at the local level in their schools and communities, they became frontline warriors who had a unique ability to examine educational materials and spaces for subversive content. And, because mothers were involved in every school and community across the country, their work allowed the movement to have a reach that was simultaneously national and local. Through this networked, participatory, and *gendered* activism, maternalist groups ensured that their vision for American education was transmitted to communities throughout the country. As Nickerson (2012, 13) argues, “The collapse of the progressive education movement in the 1950s resulted directly from conservative protest, mounted in large part by women, linked through newsletters, who undermined the zeal of school reformers one district at a time.”

By the 1970s, maternalist activists had begun to focus on other forms of domestic subversion, fearing that educational experts were “imposing their own religion, a ‘secular humanism’ that supplanted God’s authority” (Zimmerman 2022, 172). While their focus might have been different, maternalist activists in the 1970s carried forward the techniques of review and surveillance pioneered by previous groups. Like their foremothers, many fought educational battles through the coordinated surveillance of local schools. Two of the era’s most notorious activists—Norma Gabler and Alice

Moore—dedicated their efforts to decoding textbooks, searching for hidden messages that might undermine American values. Norma Gabler and her husband, Mel Gabler, started a publication called *Educational Research Analysts*, which produced reports about indoctrination in American textbooks, disseminating critiques of allegedly subversive textbooks to a large mailing list of parents and education officials across the country (Laats 2015, 193). Alice Moore’s review of new textbooks that included “multiethnic and multiracial” curricula incited the infamous Kanawha County textbook controversy of 1974, which led to a school boycott, bombing of school buses, and a concurrent miners’ strike in the fall of that year (Mason 2005, 352). Both women also pioneered a new technique for revealing the “filth” in the American education system: making it visible through political performances in which the women read aloud sections of offending textbooks in front of crowds of concerned community members or legislators. These performances transformed review and surveillance into affective, theatrical practices, generating spectacles that could mobilize community outrage and attract media attention.

Maternalist activists linked vast networks of grassroots activists through national organizations, publications, radio programs, and lecture circuits, transmitting information about how to recognize indoctrination in its many guises. These activists served as cultural watchdogs, reviewing curricula and visiting classrooms to ensure ideological conformity. Though their focus morphed from rooting out communism to combatting secular humanism, both terms referred to similar progressive policies. In their view, progressive changes within education could never be organic and democratic but were instead insidious plots to poison the minds of schoolchildren with anti-American propaganda. Moms for Liberty carries forward these activist traditions of surveillance in the twenty-first century.

Uprooting Threat: Moms for Liberty

Echoing maternalist activists of the 1950s and the 1970s, MFL insists that “woke” content has infiltrated the nation’s schools under the very noses of parents. The leaders of the organization, Tiffany Justice and Tina Desovitch, regularly explain that the pandemic allowed mothers to “see behind the education curtain” and realize that children are being indoctrinated. Like maternalist activists of yore, however, MFL assumes that this indoctrination will not be readily apparent to mothers. The organization thus focuses on providing a comprehensive program of political education. While MFL’s events often bill themselves as training for political organizing, very few events I attended focused on organizing mechanisms related to electoral politics, such as campaigning, fundraising, or lobbying elected officials. Instead, meetings took the form of seminars, lectures, and study groups that taught mothers to spot the “woke” content infiltrating the nation’s schools. At the 2023 summit, for instance, the group offered twenty-two speeches from political figures, religious leaders, or luminaries of the Christian Right

and sixteen breakout “strategy” sessions designed to train activists. Of these thirty-eight presentations, only four focused on concrete organizing strategies such as fundraising, winning elections, transitioning from campaigning to governing, or mastering effective messaging strategies. The rest focused on political education surrounding MFL’s issue areas, meaning that about 10 percent of the summit focused on training and 90 percent focused on political education.

This emphasis on careful study and research stayed consistent across every MFL event I attended. MFL’s national organization offered countless online training sessions, a book club, documentary watch parties, and libraries of resources from other organizations to help mothers learn about the threat posed by “wokeness.” In an echo of Schlafly’s anti-communist study groups, which examined the constitution, local MFL chapters hosted “Madison Meetups,” where members could study documents from America’s founding. The clearest example of the group’s educational focus was the abovementioned year-long event series called the 2022–2023 School Year for Parents (SYP). Robin Steedman explained at the “Gender 102” event: “As our kids progress through the school year, so are we as parents learning the crucial issues facing our children in schools. . . . [W]e’re trying to provide these resources to parents to help you understand what your child is up against, and what you are up against as their parent.” This event series eventually morphed into a program launched in 2025 called Moms for Liberty Academy, which made the lectures and resources from this event series into a formalized “academy” teaching parents about educational indoctrination.

As in maternalist campaigns against communism and secular humanism, MFL presented woke indoctrination as something cunning that needed to be expunged. Training sessions taught mothers how to “decode” (a word often used in training sessions) lessons about gender ideology, social emotional learning, or other woke content that might lurk in things parents initially thought harmless. Members of the group were regularly warned, for instance, that things as small as a lesson using Legos, a rainbow in the classroom, or word games could really be used to transmit “gender ideology” to kids. In a November 2023 event called “The Gender Ideology Pipeline Flowing into Williamson County” that was part of the SYP series, Steedman warned her listeners that rainbows were not as innocent as they appear:

Now what they are pushing is rainbow clubs. It’s a GSA [Gay Straight Alliance] for elementary kids. Now, my daughter, if she sees a rainbow in any form, right—shoes, you know, shirts, whatever—her eyes are just big as saucers. She loves it! Loves rainbows, sparkles, glitter. And if you put a “rainbow club” in an elementary school, she’d be all over it. And that’s the whole point! . . . The first rule of rainbow club is you don’t talk about rainbow club, not to the parents. And they give specific rules, resources for talking around the issue to the parents, because it’s all, “parents are the enemy.” We’re the gatekeepers. You got to get around us, outsmart us, because we’re not very smart.

Steedman's warning here was typical: Rainbows may *look* child-friendly, but they are really part of a sinister plot to trick children into joining queer groups in school. Throughout the rest of the session, Steedman took one thing that was real—the existence of a rainbow flag—and extended this reality to mean that school employees are part of a plot to “trans” children, that school nurses are allowed to put kids on hormone replacement therapy, and that “rainbow clubs” are taking over elementary schools. Although there is no evidence that any of those things are happening, Steedman's presentation worked to encourage parents to view teachers, administrators, and even peers as conspirators in a plot against their children.

As in previous maternalist movements, MFL's organizing is powerful because it is simultaneously national and local. Though information about supposed indoctrination is offered by MFL's national headquarters, it is designed to teach moms in local communities what to look for, how to challenge it, and how to eliminate it locally. Like their predecessors, members of MFL spread their ideology by appointing themselves as right-wing cultural watchdogs in communities across the country. Each event instructed members to use the information they learned to interview their children's teachers about what content was in schools, and why; review curricula and their children's assignments to search for traces of woke content; challenge progressive policies at school board meetings, which they were encouraged to attend; and interview their children after school to ensure that they were not exposed to anything “inappropriate” during the school day. Many chapters offer members online portals where they can report suspicious activities or teachers in their local schools for further investigation.

And, like maternalist groups of previous generations, MFL members read, review, and rate books and disseminate their reviews. Although their efforts focus primarily on library books rather than textbooks, they borrow many of the techniques of past maternalist groups. Like the DAR chapters that developed rubrics to evaluate textbooks, MFL disseminates a guide and rating system for library books called the “Book of Books.”⁶ The document provides a content-based rating system for mothers to review books, a list of commonly challenged books featuring their problematic excerpts, and a list of what schools the books have been found in. The document reminds mothers that “[p]arents have ultimate authority over their children, and we are taking back control of our children's education.” And, in a direct echo of Gabler's and Moore's strategy of creating political spectacle by reading graphic excerpts from books aloud, MFL moms read aloud from books at school board meetings or in public settings. During the “Library 101” event that was part of the SYP organized by the chapter in Williamson County, Tennessee, a member of MFL, dressed as a grandmother, sat in a rocking chair and read sexually explicit sections of contemporary queer young adult books to the audience.

6 MFL's rating guide is available online at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BNfax73kzqWwMMfk-jcogEXMDDBD-fr4O/view> (accessed September 4, 2026).

Moms for Liberty's approach to activism is deeply rooted in the traditions of maternalist activism. Like past groups, MFL works to teach mothers what indoctrination looks like and how to stop it. MFL's efforts are thus deeply instructive, shaping the way their members understand the world and equipping them with a framework through which to interpret every aspect of their children's education. In doing so, they create a powerful weapon against progressive changes in the education system by creating cohorts of watchdogs in communities throughout the country who are prepared to respond to any instance of progressive encroachment.

Reconstructing Right-Wing Culture: Maternalist Activists of the Twentieth Century

One of the primary achievements of white maternalist activism has been the construction of a right-wing cultural identity centered around patriotism, tradition, home, and family. Historians of maternalist social movements demonstrate that women played a uniquely gendered role in creating the grassroots right because of their role as cultural producers and performers (Nickerson 2012; McRae 2018; Morris 2022). I call this work of creating a cultural identity for conservatism "cultural organizing"—the kind of organizing that creates places for people to fit, articulates social identities, and polices moral boundaries within communities. I use "cultural organizing" not to create a false dichotomy between culture and politics but rather to draw attention to what historians like Nickerson (2012), McRae (2018), and Delegard (2012) identify as an undertheorized political space: a domain of white, feminine conservatism that translates the authority of the mother within the family to the political sphere. Maternalist activists conducted their cultural organizing by embedding political commitments into the fabric of everyday life, making ideologies like white supremacism and heteropatriarchy tangible and culturally enforceable. And, by performing the ideologies they sought to enforce through their dress and comportment, maternalist activists actively structured the cultural terrain upon which right-wing politics flourished.

White maternalist organizers in the twentieth century argued that they were uniquely suited to political work because of their position in the community as wives and mothers. Unlike men, who were busy with work and the obligations of the public sphere, women were "well equipped and well placed to stop brainwashing by virtue of their flexible hours, relationship to the family, and daily proximity to the community" (Nickerson 2012, 81). Lucille Crane (founder of the aforementioned *Educational Reviewer*), for instance, argued that "[t]he educational controversy is in a very real sense a woman's business. . . . [W]e women have a reputation for getting things done once we set our hands to them" (Benowitz 2009, 92). Like Crane, many white maternalist groups mobilized a strategic form of gender essentialism that reframed stereotypes of femininity as political assets. In the words of Lee Ague, a maternalist organizer in Georgia, "[a]s a gossipy, phone-happy, coffee drinking lot, [women] are innately better

equipped to spread the ‘good word’ more abundantly” (Morris 2022, 15). Through claims like these, maternalist activists naturalized the relationship between femininity and conservatism, arguing that they had a special role to play in the movement precisely *because* they were women (Kintz 1997).

This “women’s business,” however, was not the province of all women but rather the work of well-off white housewives. Nickerson (2012, 11) calls maternalist activists in the 1950s “housewife populists,” arguing that they were able to organize so successfully because of their unique ability to mobilize traditionally white, upper-class, and feminine domestic spaces to create a right-wing cultural movement. Likewise, Ague notes that conservative maternalists took “women’s traditional spaces and [made] them training grounds,” using their ample time and wealth as white housewives to construct a new public sphere of right-wing Christian culture (Morris 2022, 15). Activists started study groups in their living rooms, organized fundraisers from within Parent-Teacher Associations, sent out Christmas cards that raised awareness of right-wing issues, and hosted lunches, dinners, and other events for conservative causes. Nickerson (2012, 137) calls these new cultural constructions a “cult of wholesomeness that introduced nuclear family-style suburban domesticity into political performance.” And, according to Kintz (1997, 4), these cultural performances served to disengage “passion from the popular culture of the Sixties and associate it with the popular culture of traditional morality.”

An important part of this maternalist cultural organizing was the public performance of racialized gender roles. Activists performed the very communities and identities they claimed to protect, using their gendered positions to cultivate a specific image: a proper, ladylike, patriotic American wife and mother who fought for home and country. Brennan (2008), Nickerson (2012), Benowitz (2015), and Morris (2022) all note that maternalist activists adopted a style of dress that accentuated their gender, race, and class status, using these performances to garner media sympathy. These gendered performances were also intended to create a sharp contrast between their wholesome, traditional appearance and the sartorial choices of their opponents (Benowitz 2015, 205; Morris 2022, 8). Nickerson (2012, 138) argues that, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, “[o]utrage over shorter skirts, longer hair, and campus demonstrators inspired political style as counterdemonstration,” causing activists to perform right-wing ideals “in their bodily appearance, in their cheerful demeanor, and in the homey settings they created for politicization.” The concept of “traditional morality” was made real through performances like these. Housewife populists intentionally sharpened the sartorial differences between groups, thus bringing new cultural categories into being. McRae (2018, 112) further demonstrates that “white motherhood and womanhood had become a kind of racial performance,” highlighting how performances of femininity were inextricable from performances of whiteness.

If the public performance of traditional ladylike domesticity served as a vehicle for maternalists’ political and cultural influence, it simultaneously allowed them to operate

under the radar. McRae (2018, 10), for instance, notes that white mothers are often not included in histories of segregation and white supremacy because their activism was “so interwoven into daily life that it appeared unremarkable.” Activist groups “boiled down communism, the rise of the United Nations, and decolonization into the substance of daily life and then offered instruction in how to combat those forces by watching out for what their children learned, whom they married, and even how they trick-or-treated” (7). This technique of mobilizing the language of “women’s work” and everyday domestic life also allowed maternalist activists to make their messaging accessible and actionable to women within their communities. Ague, for instance, notes that maternalist activists in 1960s Georgia would explain political work to potential recruits using “the language of women’s domestic work such as laundry, gardening, and cooking,” comparing political organizing to growing flowers or baking apple pie (Morris 2022, 17). Yoking the political and the domestic further convinced many mothers of the righteousness of their cause. Fighting “radicalism” became care work, an extension of maternal duty.

Two interrelated themes emerge in historical literature on maternalist activists: first, that many women activists claimed to not be political operatives; and second, that these women claimed to represent home and family against elite reformers. These arguments relied on and strengthened each other, allowing maternalists to position their work as mothering rather than activism. Laats (2015, 189) notes that Alice Moore, the activist who sparked the Kanawha County textbook controversy, presented herself as a “non-partisan ‘mother’ hoping only to inject some common sense onto the school board,” and as a woman who had “somehow only stumbled into this textbook controversy.” Likewise, Norma Gabler claimed that she began her textbook reviews because her son was upset with some of the content, causing her to take a closer look and react in horror to what she saw (Dowland 2015, 38). This pattern of self-presentation extended beyond individual activists to broader maternalist movements. Verhoeven’s (2022, 775) analysis of maternalist letter-writing campaigns in response to the 1962 Becker Amendment—a proposal to amend the Constitution to permit prayer and Bible reading in public schools—describes how “writers began by declaring themselves to be wives, mothers (often listing the number of children they had), and even grandmothers. To counter any accusation of stepping beyond the bounds of their natural sphere, several stressed that they had never written to Congress before.”

This “just moms” rhetoric allowed maternalist activists to create a sharp divide between “ordinary” housewives defending their communities and “elite” reformers, who were portrayed as self-serving and dismissive of the needs of everyday families. According to Nickerson (2012, 17), maternalist activists argued that their “communities were under siege by political elites inciting turmoil that they, as women, needed to repel as housewives—the humblest, most self-sacrificial, and least pretentious members of American society.” Kintz (1997, 78) calls this a type of “purifying folkling” that helped to construct an idealized vision of a threatened “authentic” America rooted in traditional

family structures. By framing white housewives as authentic Americans and reformers as illegitimate outsiders, such rhetoric furthered maternalist arguments that civil rights reforms were forms of communism imposed by outside elites.

Maternalist cultural organizing created new categories of political legitimacy and new categories of belonging. Through their dress, ladylike behavior, and mobilization in domestic spaces, white maternalists created “traditional morality” and the “traditional family” as tangible, visible things to be protected. Ironically, the less political these mothers seemed, the more power they held, because to challenge them was to challenge the moral authority of motherhood. By positioning themselves as the common-sense moral voice of the nation, these mothers successfully advocated for the maintenance of systems of oppression while insisting they worked only to protect their children.

Reconstructing Right-Wing Culture: Moms for Liberty

Moms for Liberty replicates the cultural organizing tactics pioneered by previous maternalist groups. MFL members describe themselves as “mama bears” who, although they were not interested in politics in the past, have come to realize that protecting the innocence of their children means they must fight. They identify the locus of their political power in childrearing, arguing that their roles as wives and mothers give them special authority over schools and other institutions pertaining to children. And, like their foremothers, the activists of MFL claim that they participate in their movement not as citizens, not as activists, not as Republicans, not as politicians, but as mothers. For them, motherhood is an identity that places them above the fray, a space from which they can reach for objectivity and claim an authority that cannot be challenged.

Like its predecessors, MFL channels its organizing efforts into resisting what members perceive as the left’s growing cultural and political influence in their communities. Members explicitly articulated the growing acceptance of LGBTQ people—alongside the encroachment of other progressive ideas—as a rapid, shocking, and unwelcome change. A common refrain among members was that, ten to fifteen years ago, progressive ideologies like LGBTQ rights and racial justice were entirely absent from schools and the broader society. Members vowed to use their roles as mothers and community members to stop these ideologies from, as they often said, “getting into the culture.” Robin Steedman put it as follows: “If we’re lucky, we’re five to seven years too late. It is a cement that’s already set. . . . [P]ay attention to what hasn’t set yet, because you have a better chance of fighting when the cement is still being rolled, right?”⁷ For Steedman, this “cement” was the normalization and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ identities in American life. Steedman’s metaphor of unset cement reflects

7 This quote is from “The Gender Ideology Pipeline,” a training event on November 29, 2022, that was part of the 2022–2023 SYP.

MFL's broader strategy: to control the cultural environment surrounding schools and children, believing that once progressive ideas about race, gender, and sexuality take root there, they become nearly impossible to remove.

Moms for Liberty's complaints about progressive cultural shifts are deeply intertwined with its own forms of cultural organizing. Like its predecessors in the twentieth century, the group uses women's spaces to cultivate right-wing parenting communities and rebuild the right-wing social world it believes has been lost. MFL events make right-wing values the very glue of community. MFL meetings are often not just meetings but an occasion to make friends and gossip, and, for many women, to have a night to themselves, free from their children and their husbands. Of the events I analyzed on the organization's webpage or received invitations to via chapter emails, many involved knitting circles, playdates, or movie nights about anti-trans politics. Chapters encourage members to maintain an active presence in their local communities, asking them to table with friends at holiday or community festivals, participate in local parades, or coordinate holiday toy drives. Events almost always opened with a prayer, rooting each gathering in a shared Christian faith that also framed activism as religious duty. As a South Carolina chapter chair put it during an episode of the *Joyful Warriors* podcast entitled "How to Engage Woke Ideologies":

We kind of wanted to make [MFL] like the cool fun place for parents to be where they can meet other people, and really get excited and engaged and feel a sense of community. . . . So we did a lot of social events. And then we kind of snuck in a little bit of, like, educating parents. . . . So we try to make it very fun and engaging, but also kind of teaching them how they can be empowered to make change. (Justice 2022)

Through creating warm, inviting community spaces rooted in white feminine domesticity, MFL both fostered a sense of belonging among activists and ensured that political action is woven into the fabric of everyday social life.

Like their twentieth-century predecessors, MFL also mobilizes strategic gender essentialism, taking traditionally feminine spaces and making them political training grounds. MFL training sessions often explicitly encourage mothers to feminize political organizing, calling on activists to recognize that women need to get involved in politics *as women*. In a November 2023 session entitled "Winning with Women Voters," the group's trainer, Ellen Walters, instructed the gathered moms to gender their activism, offering slides with gender essentialist statements like "Women like to be heard" and "Women are the ones who volunteer." She encouraged the group to put on specifically gendered events: sign waving for candidates in school pick-up lines, self-defense bonding classes where all the women wear high heels, political education events with popsicles in the park for kids, or holiday parades and cancer walks where attendees wear matching MFL T-shirts. She reminded moms that, to organize women, one needed to be welcoming and friendly, stating that meetings are "not a fashion show. It's

not a competition. . . . And if there is somebody new, reach out to them and invite them to join your group! . . . We never want to be the mean girl, we want to be the girl that builds up the other moms!” Instructions like these offered a twenty-first-century spin on Ague’s metaphors about gardening or laundry, framing activism in traditionally feminized ways.

And, like the Christian activists in the 1970s who embraced traditional sartorial choices to differentiate themselves from “gender-bending” hippies, members of MFL perform ideals of traditional femininity through their dress to differentiate themselves from queer and trans people. Across the events I attended, particularly events in Southern states like Tennessee and Florida, members of MFL self-consciously performed a distinctly white, female, and Christian style that accentuated gender conformity. MFL members were also regularly reminded at the beginning of meetings and throughout the summits that they were to be “joyful warriors,” channeling their rage at woke education into grace, poise, and warmth. These traditionally feminine appearances and styles of comportment were mobilized—as in Nickerson’s (2012) histories of conservative mothers after World War II—to draw a contrast between the moms and left-wing protestors. Near the end of MFL’s second summit in 2023, Tiffany Justice gave a speech about the protestors outside the event intended to galvanize the moms in the face of the intense criticism their Summit had garnered. Justice drew a contrast between the members of MFL and the protestors outside the event, saying: “You guys are beautiful. You’re smiling. You’re happy. You’re making friends. The protestors outside are very unhappy. . . . You’re exposing my plan! It’s just that the distance couldn’t be more stark. Hopefully, America is watching this. We could tell them, and tell them, and tell them. . . . But until they see it for themselves?” Justice referred directly to “her plan”—creating a striking juxtaposition between the queer and trans protestors hosting a dance party outside in the summer heat and the buttoned-up, well-dressed members of MFL advocating for their children. She wanted America to watch and understand a clear chain of associations: Gendered norms mean order, and the moms who perform them so well are simultaneously expressing their respect for other forms of hierarchy.

Like their predecessors, MFL members report their activism as emerging from traditional gender roles, often characterizing themselves as apolitical wives and mothers. The most common refrain I heard across my years of participant observation with MFL was “I was never involved in politics, but . . .” This phrase was used across countless promotional videos for the organization, most of which featured a mother who narrated her path from apolitical wife and mother to activist.⁸ Megan Brock, for instance, began an event called “FOIA 101 with Megan Brock” with a typical opening statement: “I live

8 See “If You’re Anything Like Me, You Probably Never Paid Much Attention to Politics,” posted August 26, 2022, by Moms for Liberty, YouTube, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-J0Kmwvc_cg.

in the suburbs of Philadelphia and I'm a mom. Three years ago, I didn't even know what a public records request was. And now I've submitted probably an embarrassing amount of public records requests!" Like maternalist letter writers of the twentieth century, almost every MFL speaker would introduce herself by listing her name, marital status, how many children she had, and their ages and genders. Through introductions like these, members rooted claims in a clear identity position: motherhood. These claims were reinforced by the fact that children were often present at MFL events. Many politicians that spoke at summits brought their children onstage with them, all of the summits offered daycare, and, at the 2023 summit, MFL members' children performed a play about the American Revolution.

Moms for Liberty's approach to political activism mirrors the maternalist organizing traditions of earlier groups. By positioning themselves as "just moms"—apolitical women drawn into activism out of maternal duty—MFL members claim a moral authority rooted in their roles as caregivers. This maternalist framing allows them to present their activism as instinctive rather than ideological, tied to the natural order of motherhood. The group's strategic mobilization of feminized spaces and activities weaves political engagement into the fabric of everyday life, bringing new activists into the fold and fostering a sense of belonging rooted in right-wing cultures. By positioning themselves as the moral counterpoint to what they perceive as a societal breakdown, MFL works to (re)create right-wing Christian cultures built around the nuclear family.

Conclusion

Moms for Liberty continues a longstanding tradition of white maternalist political organizing. I have identified three features of this tradition. First, maternalist activists suture a variety of progressive policies into a single bundle of menace that is said to threaten family, child, and parental rights. While the name of this threat has changed throughout the years—first communism, then secular humanism, now "wokeness"—the response to it has not. In each era, maternalist activists have organized by teaching mothers to recognize the threat and uproot it in their local communities. Mothers then act as agents of cultural surveillance, working to undo the "infiltration" of progressivism into right-thinking American communities. These organizing tactics are powerful because they connect national or global issues to the everyday decisions of local teachers and school districts, offering mothers clear directives for combatting progressivism. Maternalist activists then use cultural organizing to make real the vision of home, child, and family that the right claims to defend, securing the political innocence of their movements by claiming that they fight not for the oppression of other groups but for the protection of the family.

Understanding the resonance between MFL's work and the work of maternalist activists of the twentieth century is important because these histories reveal how white maternalist activists have created a durable vocabulary of opposition against social

justice movements. By positioning themselves as apolitical protectors of children and families, MFL taps into a familiar, emotionally charged narrative that has historically been used to justify opposition to civil rights, queer liberation, and social welfare programs. Recognizing this ideological lineage helps us see that MFL's fight against so-called indoctrination in schools is not simply about age-appropriateness or parental rights but about reinforcing broader systems of racial, gender, and sexual hierarchy. It also reveals that MFL's localized campaigns, such as challenging books in school libraries or pressuring school boards to ban discussions of race and gender, cannot merely be understood as the isolated acts of concerned parents. Instead, they are part of a coordinated, ideologically driven effort to use the education system to fortify white, heteronormative, and patriarchal conceptions of family and nation.

Understanding white maternalism as a political tradition calls into question the "just moms" defense with which MFL has long responded to charges of extremism or hate. This rhetoric plays on the misogynistic idea that women are inherently apolitical, implying that their activism is merely an extension of natural maternal instincts rather than a long-standing political strategy. This framing works to obscure the group's ideological goals by presenting their actions as nonthreatening and rooted in care, rather than in a broader reactionary agenda. By unmasking this narrative, we can see how MFL weaponizes motherhood to advance a deeply political project aimed at retrenching systems of oppression. We can also resist the temptation to dismiss the group's activism as overprotective parenting or mindless hysteria. Instead, we must take seriously the historical continuity of white maternalist organizing and its ongoing impact on educational policy, civil rights, and social justice movements.

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Appendix

Moms for Liberty National Summits, In-Person Attendance

7/14/2022–7/17/2022: Tampa, FL
 6/29/2023–7/2/2023: Philadelphia, PA
 8/29/2024–9/1/2024: Washington, DC

Moms for Liberty Chapter Events

School Year for Parents Event Series, Williamson County, TN, MFL Chapter (Franklin, TN), Virtual Attendance

5/19/21: "Critical Race Theory," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/news/crt101-event-williamson-tn-chapter/>
 10/17/22: "SEL 101—Social Emotional Learning," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/sel101/>
 11/7/22: "Gender 101—Gender Ideology," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/gender-101/>
 11/10/22: "Gender 102," <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/gender-102/>

11/29/22: “The Gender Ideology Pipeline Flowing into Williamson County,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgeHXbJQfQM>

1/24/23: “Restorative Justice 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/rj101>

2/13/23: “Comprehensive Sexuality Education 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/cse101/>

2/21/23: “Comprehensive Sexuality Education 102,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/cse102>

3/20/23: “Library 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/library-101>

4/10/23: “Library 102,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/library-102>

4/17/23: “Marxism 101,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/marxism-101/>

5/8/23: “Capstone,” <https://momsforlibertywc.org/events/capstone-101/>

America First Patriots Club, “Empower” Event, Broward County, FL, MFL Chapter, In-Person Attendance

3/14/23: Broward County, FL

Feed My Sheep Foundation, “We Don’t stand Alone” Event, Erie County and Wayne County, NY, MFL Chapters, Virtual Attendance

1/18/23: Webinar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmDelCH0Eyc>.

National Training Events, Virtual Attendance

Zoom or Online Trainings

1/16/24: “Gender Ideology: What It Is & How to Defeat It,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2117/>

12/1/23: “Campaign Conversations—Are You Ready to Run?,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2033/>

11/28/23: “Winning with Women Voters,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2032/>

11/16/23: “The WSCC Model: Community/Healthy Schools,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2032/>

11/9/23: “FOIA Training,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/2017/>

5/10/23: “FOIA 101 with Megan Brock,” <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1680/>

All-Member Meetings

9/7/2023: event webpage unavailable

12/7/2023: event webpage unavailable

"Constitutional Conversations" Series with KrisAnne Hall

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1/31/2023: "Rights vs. Benefits," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1384/>

2/22/2023: "The Pursuit of Happiness," <https://portal.momsforliberty.org/events/1461/>

3/21/2023: "Legislating Liberty: Questions Every American Should Ask Before Supporting Legislation," event webpage unavailable

4/25/2023: "In Their Footsteps: Lessons from Our Founding Mothers," event webpage unavailable

6/7/2023: "State Sovereignty," event webpage unavailable