An Outlook into Activism by Mothers, Fathers, and others for More Sustainable Living Environments

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1 Introduction

Social movements are known to be a driving force of change processes. These are made by an agglomeration of concerned and/or affected citizens who choose to join forces with the objective to advance agendas of change around values and objectives they come to share. Scholars long had an interest in how social movements form, develop and fade out, and how such activism is shaping public discourse and policy change at different levels. Also, there has been growing interest in studying what motivates people to engage in activism and what they get activated about. Of special interest is the last wave of *mothering activism* – understood to be activism undertaken by mothers who mobilise and become active in groups and movements made of other mothers seeking change in the context of environmental equity and climate justice (Sengupta, 2022).

Mothering activism is not new. Logsdon-Conradsen (2011) notes that motherhood has often worked as a push for women to work for the betterment of society and for most that means taking on tasks that benefit not only their individual families and households, but the broader community as well. Motherhood has moral authority. By becoming mothers, women gain recognition and a new position in society and use the symbolic power that comes with the mother archetype to push for change. Studies about moter led activism report these groups being active on human rights issues (Bosco, 2007) but also include initiatives seeking improvement and/or access to health care, reproduction, child-care, and education (Naples, 1992). However, if early mother led movements mobilised for equity and access in the context of social welfare in recent years this expanded to include environmental equity and climate justice (Cripps 2017; Logsdon-Conradsen 2011). For instance, the number of mothers mobilising globally on climate justice is growing and, with few notable exceptions to date, this movement remains largely under investigated.

We shall briefly note how mothering activism is different from other forms of activism. For instance: (i) mothering activism often centers around issues that specifically affect mothers and their children, such as maternal health, childcare, and education. This focus on the experiences and needs of mothers and families can result in a more personalized and intimate approach compared to other activism; (ii) mothering activists often emphasize the importance of caring and nurturing relationships, both within families and in broader communities which leads to a more collaborative and supportive approach to activism, where building relationships and community connections are seen as integral parts of making change; (iii) mothering activism often incorporates the experiences and perspectives of those who have been traditionally marginalized or excluded from more mainstream forms of activism. This can include women of color and low-income families, among others. By centering voices and experiences of those who have been historically marginalized, mothering activism seeks to create more inclusive and equitable solutions to contemporary societal challenges (Logsdon-Conradsen 2011).

Overall, mothering activism emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and social change, the importance of addressing the needs and experiences of families and communities, and it puts forward *care* as a fundamental pillar and cornerstone for a better society. The latter is of a special interest to research that seeks to advance understanding of how an *ethics of care* could inform more contemporary governance models. Thus, we are interested to learn more about how mothering activism might be challenging models and ideas of care, and how it might be contributing at pushing and redefining care in the context of inter- and intra- generational equity. To the best of our knowledge no study of this specific aspect is currently available. With the ambition to fill this gap we undertook an inventory of mothering activism at a global scale. In this report we introduce the database developed in that process and summarise some first trends we observed emerging from that preliminary investigation.

2 Methods

The work reported here sought to map out groups, movements and organizations made up in large extent of mothers who in that role engage in activism and related activities in the public sphere. Here we report on the steps undertaken which included (i) identification of mothering groups and movements of our interest, (ii) selection of movements, and (iii) development of a database about these with key information of our interest.

2.1 Mapping movements

We started the process with a first definition of the type of groups we wanted to identify and map. These were mothering activist groups, movements, associations, or organization understood to be groups led by mothers who advocate for change and seek equity and justice for children and youth. While we acknowledge that there are other groups mobilising for equity and justice,

many of which are in fact led by women (who may or may not be mothers), we were specifically interested in groups who leverage on motherhood and in some ways appear to be using the "*mother archetype*" in their narratives and pursuits for change.

We began with a first list of movements and groups active in Europe during years 2021 and 2022. All had an active social media profile and were our starting point in the search of confirmation about the mothering movement. Thus, we have looked at the social networks they are part of and which other mothering movements they are connected with at a global scale. This quickly led us to identify further groups of mother activists and the list of organizations of potential interest grew substantially. In addition to information retrieved via searches into social media platforms we also undertook general searches into Google. For this we used a combination of key words in the different languages we speak (i.e., English, Italian Spanish, Slovene, Portuguese, Norwegian and Croat). The keywords used were: "organization," "mothers," "fathers," "climate," "future," "advocacy," "children," "grandchildren," "earth," "activism", "climate change", "environmental justice" and "tomorrow" translated in the different languages as needed. These searches were undertaken in spring 2023 with April 14th being the last day of search. All searchers relied on information that is available and freely accessible online.

2.2 Selection criteria

We were interested to trace when mothers, as those who are understood to have a moral duty of care for children and youth, become politically active in that role and how they use ethics of care to mobilise and pursue change in the context of environmental inequalities children face. However, in the view of our interest to study how the construct of *care* is being used, re-defined and challenged as part of ongoing struggles in the context of current environmental challenges, quite early in this process we decided to use a *broad approach*. Thus, we have also included movements of *mothers* who might be having a mixed format and be made up also of other profiles e.g. fathers and grandparents.

Thus, we used two selection criteria: i) organizations/movements self-identify as being led by those who have a duty of care e.g. mothers, fathers, grandparents, or other caregivers and ii) organizations/movements which take action to improve the quality of life for their children, grandchildren, and future generations in urban contexts. Every group, movement, or initiative that we came across was checked against these two se-

lection criteria before inclusion into the database.

2.3 Developing the database of mothering movements

We used an Excel file to develop our database and chose to annotate descriptive information about who mobilises, what they mobilise about, whom they seek to speak to/with and major achievements. After groups were checked against the above listed selection criteria and a decision was made to include them in the database, we continued with searches online to obtain qualitative information needed to populate the database. The information was obtained across different sources including social media, blogpost, webpages, reports, and other online materials. Information about variables of interest was taken from these and then transcribed into the database in its original format. When information was appearing in other languages it was translated to English before being included in the database. We have tried to stay as close as possible to the texts used by groups online and have not altered or interpreted information.

2.4 Limitations

There are two limitations to the database described in this report. The first limitation is that by undertaking searches online we were able to collect information about and inventory only movements and groups who have social media accounts or are present online in some form. However, we acknowledge that there are likely additional movements and organizations which might not have a social media presence and about whom information may not appear online. The second limitation is that when undertaking searches these were limited to the languages we speak. Thus, we acknowledge that the database is shaped by these two limitations and as such, in its current version, it is not a comprehensive list of all the mothering groups/movements active globally. Rather it can be understood to be an inventory of organizations/movements who have some level of online presence in these languages: English, Portuguese, Spanish, Norwegian, Italian, Slovene and Croatian.

3 Results & Discussion

The steps described above lead us to a total of 50 groups/organizations/movements which were included into the database and about which qualitative data was collected and annotated in the database. In this section

we provide description of these groups and a summary of some first trends observed.

3.1 Geographical distribution and activist's profiles

The data collected about the 50 activist groups shows that they are quite diverse in their self-descriptions. The majority self-describes as "mothers and allies," "parents," and "parents with allies". The second-largest group self-describes as families, grandmothers, and elders. The remaining use more specific labels, such as "mothers and scientists," "grandparents and elders," "grandparents," "mothers and grandmothers," "parents

and grandparents," "parents and families," "fathers," and "mothers, parents, grandparents, and families."

The totality of the identified organisations define themselves as nonpartisan and non-religious organisations and seem to be sharing the aim of working for a world that is suitable and inhabitable also for future generations.

Information collected suggests that leading voices and faces of these organisations are mostly women who are also mothers. However, we also observe how motherhood is not used that prominently in the mobilisation campaigns these groups use. Rather most groups appear to have chosen to take on a broader and more inclusive profile and are often using a caregiver narrati-
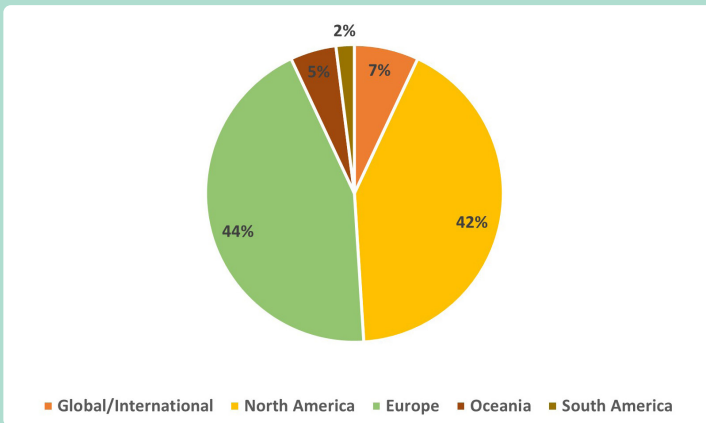

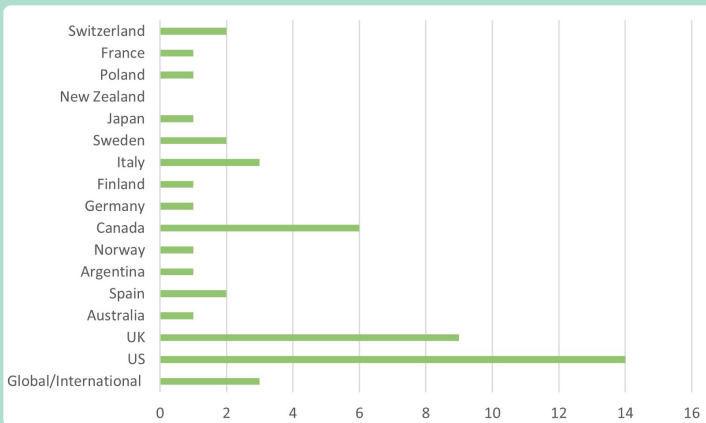Fig.1 Global distribution of selected cases

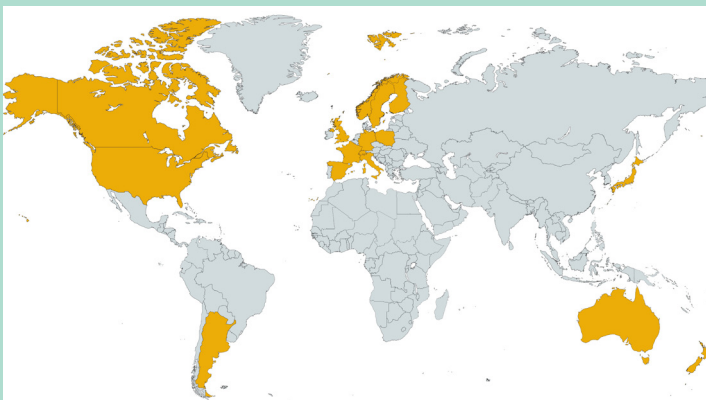Fig.2 Country level distribution of selected cases

Fig.3 Geographic distribution of selected cases

ve. This is often positioned in relation to the moral contract that parents have towards their children, ensuring a dignified life today and in the future. Future research could investigate how the archetype of mother, father or parent is used in mobilization campaigns and shapes the way ideas about care are used as part of their mobilisation strategies. Of interest are also differences across cultures. For instance, Naples (1992) writes about local cultures in the USA and reflects on differences in mothering between the White and Black community, with the Black community being the one where mothers are more likely to work for the betterment of not only their own family, but of the whole community.

The geographical distribution of the 50 groups shows that 42% are based in North America, 44% are based in Europe while 4% are based in Oceania, 2% in South America and 2% in Asia. (Fig 1). A further look at a country level (Fig 2; Fig 3) shows that 14 are based in the United States, 9 are based in United Kingdom, 6 in Canada, 3 in Italy and 2 in Spain. Additionally, Sweden, and Switzerland have two organizations each, while France, Germany, Norway, Poland, and Finland each have one. Our search only found two mothering activist organizations in Oceania, with one in Australia and one in New Zealand. Finally, we were able to identify 1 organisation in Asia based in Japan and only one in South America based in Argentina.

The groups/organizations/movements who self-describe as *global* are made of many local nodes active in different countries of different sizes and levels of connectedness with each other. In most cases local nodes appear to have very similar objectives, and strategies and for this reason we choose to inventory them as a global group rather than counting each of them individually per continent. This includes 6% of the 50 groups selected.

3.2 On what and how they mobilise

The data we have collected on what the groups and movements mobilise about suggest that this includes climate change, global warming, reducing carbon emissions, reducing air pollution, preserving biodiversity, and fighting against discrimination in the context of environmental pollution.

Many of these groups connect to larger issues via local initiatives and through concrete actions such as planting trees, promoting the use of bikes as transportation, advocating for shifting towards electrical cars, electric stoves, solar panels and geothermal systems, heat pumps or weatherizing homes for saving energy.

Many of them also target schools as their preferred action point, working for a switch to electric buses in schools, including climate change as part of children's education, and ensuring schools are built to minimize exposure to pollutants.

The groups we mapped work with other organisations (e.g. youth environmental organisations) with whom they share interests and support their projects, join their demonstrations and promote their work. Some of them are also active in international networks and are active in the organisation of webinars, raising money for causes they support, creating educational material for schools and the public, etc.

3.3 Whom they seek to influence and speak to/with

A vast majority of the organisations we included in the database aim to reach out to other parents, politicians, policymakers, and the general public. Information collected suggests a shared need to create community. We also observed how communication campaigns are often targeting other parents seen as allies in the struggles they mobilise about, and key change makers.

Through advocacy work these groups often seek to influence decision-makers, business owners, and the public. They speak directly with politicians and push for legislation that supports their agenda. They engage with business owners to encourage them to make more environmentally friendly choices.

Their communication campaigns also aim to impact the general public, for example, by campaigning for greater awareness of where pension funds are invested and the industries they indirectly support (such as tobacco and fossil fuels). They also campaign against over-consumption during Christmas time, promoting alternative ways to celebrate that are more environmentally friendly.

4 Conclusions

One of the key concerns caregivers, parents, mothers, and guardians have is the wellbeing of their children in the near but also more distant future. The level of uncertainty about what lies ahead for young people is unprecedented. The recent wave of mothering activism and parent led mobilisation signals a shared concern at a global scale and of the need to make their voices heard. These movements also bring up questions of how to go about intra and inter-generational equity and justice. Future research might look into what parent led

groups are saying about possible futures, what type of narratives they use, and how they are positioning ideas about care in relation to those who are born today, and those who are yet to be born.

Further, mothering activism is an interesting example of how social archetypes are used to gain visibility, advance claims, and pursue change processes that are seeking to benefit children and youth. In this sense, some literature has been discussing activists' adoption of motherhood as a performative practice which seeks to put on display the pain coming from hardship, discrimination, and inequality experienced by families and communities. As such, mobilization that takes up the archetype of mother, father or parent is powerful and appeals to a universal ethic of care and belonging. It is interesting to observe how these movements are slowly emerging and growing in numbers. Further research into how these are contributing at pushing ethics of care across different platforms, and what governance outcomes might result from some of these mobilization campaigns, is also needed. Also, of great interest is to observe if, when and how parenting and mothering movements are contributing to change and redefine ideas about care as a collective practice in the Global North.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset titled "Inventory of Mothering and Fathering Activism for More Sustainable Living Environments _ V1" has been deposited to the SVN data repository. It is available under the following identifier https://doi.org/10.5878/n0cb-4f19 and is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY 4.0).

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Youth Plan

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