

## Motherhood and Suffrage in Early Twentieth-Century Canadian Women's Journals

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### Abstract

Maternal feminists of Canada's early women's movements used their publications to define who should be a Canadian citizen and who deserved the vote. To this end, maternal feminists created an exclusionary concept of motherhood that reached from the domestic to the national sphere in order to justify their own enfranchisement and sense of belonging at the expense of marginalized groups—namely women who did not or could not bear sons, women who could not meet popular child-rearing standards, Indigenous women, and immigrants who were not perceived to be white. The exclusionary rhetoric and ideologies put forward by early twentieth-century Canadian women's journals not only cut off marginalized groups from enfranchisement and national belonging but also further entrenched the social, racial, and gender divides that alienated these groups in the first place.

**Keywords:** enfranchisement; colonialism; imperialism; maternal feminism; motherhood

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## Introduction

We read in history of the Vestal Virgins. They had the power, by raising a hand, to save a Life—and even Nero obeyed! Women! why are we not recognizing this power to-day? Have the Vestal Virgins let the fire die down in the Temple of their hearts—in the “Secret place of the Most High?” Is the unsullied, snow-white banner of Love, emblem of a woman’s purity, floating out over a sin-sick world from the pinnacle of that Temple—Honour holding it aloft, Truth supporting it? Motherhood! The world is sick with longing to be mothered. (Campbell-MacIver, 1917, p. 9)

Writing in the early twentieth-century Canadian women’s journal *Woman’s Century*, J. Campbell-MacIver invoked a concept of motherhood characterized by strength, purity, and love. While aggrandized and dramatic, this notion of motherhood draws on an ideological understanding of women’s domestic and political functions discussed in terms of citizenship and enfranchisement in the publications of Canada’s early women’s movements. This article argues that the maternal feminists of Canada’s early women’s movements crafted an exclusionary notion of motherhood in their publications to justify their own enfranchisement and sense of belonging at the expense of marginalized groups, which included women who did not bear sons, women who could not meet popular child-rearing standards, Indigenous women, and immigrants who were not perceived to be white.

In her recent book, *Ours by Every Law of Right and Justice* (2020), historian and Indigenous studies scholar Dr. Sarah Carter has described the obstacle-ridden path traversed by suffragists in the prairie provinces to obtain the vote. However, Carter has also critiqued Canadian suffragists who strove to secure suffrage for women while remaining complacent when foreigners and Indigenous peoples were denied the vote (2020). This article contributes to this discourse by casting a critical eye on the insidious tactics and ideologies employed by members of Canada’s early women’s suffrage movement. Additionally, this article engages directly with the primary source materials produced by maternal feminists in the early twentieth century to substantiate arguments regarding the ideologies of twentieth-century Canadian suffragists. By clearly articulating those who were separated from and overlooked by maternal feminist rhetoric, this article encourages a more inclusive approach to current social and political reform by calling on the reader to be cognizant of the philosophies and principles that underlie purported social progress.

Part one of this article, “Maternal Feminism, Women’s Suffrage, and Women’s Publications,” introduces the concept of maternal feminism—an ideology adopted by certain women’s movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Canada, these movements sponsored journals that gave maternal feminists a platform to define themselves as citizens, justify their claims for enfranchisement, and negotiate the concepts of motherhood, nationalism, and citizenship. Part two, “The Domestic Strain of Motherhood,” focuses on domestic aspects of motherhood, which doctors and specialists defined in terms of biology, social convention, and early twentieth-century child-rearing standards. Part three of this article, “The Imperial Strain of Motherhood,” argues that the maternal feminist notions of motherhood propagated through women’s journals related not only to domestic motherhood but also to a nationalist motherhood rooted in colonialist ideologies that excluded Indigenous women and non-white-presenting immigrants. Early twentieth-century women’s journals conspicuously omitted

Indigenous women, just as white settler populations across Canada attempted to eradicate Indigenous peoples. By dividing Canadian immigrants into socially acceptable and unacceptable groups, women’s journals frequently discussed white-presenting immigrants with approval while disregarding visible minority immigrants. Part four, “Maternal Feminism in Perspective,” explores modern and contemporary critiques of maternal feminist ideologies to suggest that the exclusionary rhetoric explored in parts two and three not only precluded marginalized groups from enfranchisement and national belonging but further entrenched the social, racial, and gender divides that alienated these groups in the first place.

### **Maternal Feminism, Women’s Suffrage, and Women’s Publications**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, maternal feminists began to articulate their beliefs about the roles of women in the home and in politics. Historian Heather Green (2017) has examined the rise of maternal feminism and the concept of motherhood in the Canadian prairies during the early twentieth century to provide a nuanced analysis of the ideologies that underpinned maternal feminism. Maternal feminism was defined by domesticity and motherhood, which supported the traditional role of women as keepers of the household and as political participants, though restricted by patriarchal norms (Green, 2017). This branch of feminism viewed mothers as ethical teachers for their children and the nation. In this regard, maternal feminists pursued “suffrage, temperance, and moral reform” (p. 49). In these pursuits, maternal feminists perceived motherhood to be an immutable ideological foundation, which they used to exclusionary effect. The onset of the First World War enabled maternal feminists to put their ideologies into action. In the home, women cared for children and ran the household while their husbands waged war. Mothers provided moral guidance for their children in order to raise model citizens and leaders. In public life, women joined the workforce and ran volunteer organizations, which enabled them to employ their “maternal qualities” in the war effort (Arnup, 2013, p. 251). For example, the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire raised funds to purchase a hospital ship and called on women to express their maternal qualities by nurturing and mending wounded soldiers (Glassford, 2021). Additionally, women’s organizations enlisted women to knit socks and roll bandages for soldiers overseas by framing these tasks as maternal work (Glassford, 2021). The contributions women made to the war effort, both in private and in public life, contributed to their enfranchisement. In this way, women’s citizenship was based on their maternal role, which extended from the home to the national arena (Arnup, 2013).

Maternal feminism was also intricately linked with British-Canadian colonial nationalism. According to maternal feminist ideology, women’s maternal attributes contributed to nation-building and national purification (Vickers, 2000). In the public sphere, mothers exemplified purity and temperance to encourage national loyalty and restraint. As will be demonstrated, maternal feminist values excluded from the definition of ideal citizenry marginalized groups who did not adhere to colonialist conceptions of national loyalty, such as Indigenous populations and non-Anglo-European immigrants. Accordingly, maternal feminists found a firm foothold in the women’s movements of the early twentieth century, whose publications closely linked maternal feminism, colonial nationalism, and suffrage (Arnup, 2013). Specifically, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, National Council of Women of Canada, Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, and Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste published journals that provided a platform for contributors to negotiate the role of women in private and public life as well as grapple with key issues, such as citizenship, enfranchisement, and motherhood.

Formed in 1874, the primary goal of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was to combat the effects of alcohol in domestic life (Arnup, 2013; Strong-Boag, 2016). The WCTU published *The Woman’s Journal*, which ran until 1903, and *Canadian White Ribbon Tidings*, which was launched in 1904 (Ontario Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, 2015). The National Council of Women of Canada (NCWC) was formed in 1893 and focused on motherhood, childcare, and family-related welfare (Arnup, 2013; Kinahan, 2008). The NCWC supported women’s suffrage because its members believed that women should be active as mothers and nation-builders (Vickers, 2000). White contributors to the NCWC argued for their enfranchisement as “mothers of the race” in order to maintain social, racial, and gender norms (“Another Convert to Suffrage,” 1916; Kinahan, 2008, p. 13). The NCWC published *Woman’s Century* from 1913 until 1921.<sup>2</sup> The Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste (FNSJB) formed in 1902 and was closely associated with the NCWC (Strong-Boag, 2016). Like the NCWC, the FNSJB had roots in a maternalism that fought for suffrage as well as the protection of mothers and families (Cohen, 2017). The FNSJB published *La Bonne Parole* monthly, beginning in 1913 (Dumont, 2007). The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) formed in 1900, adhered to maternalistic ideologies, and worked defensively during World War One. As their name suggests, IODE also held imperial, colonial, and nationalist outlooks (Pickles, 2002). The IODE published the magazine *Echoes*, beginning in 1901, and occasionally ran a column in the NCWC’s *Woman’s Century*.

In short, these publications provided a way for sponsor organizations, largely comprised of maternal feminists, to negotiate the role of women in domestic and public spheres. Early twentieth-century women’s journals created spaces for maternal feminists to define themselves as citizens and articulate why they deserved enfranchisement. By engaging with journals sponsored by maternal feminists, this article contends that minority women struggled to gain recognition and autonomy as Canadian citizens due to the rhetoric employed by maternal feminists. The sections that follow explore the extent to which these publications used the concept of motherhood as an exclusionary force to justify the place of white women in society at the expense of certain marginalized groups, including childless women, Indigenous women, and visible minority immigrants.

### **The Domestic Strain of Motherhood**

Maternal feminists’ definition of motherhood was bounded by biological and social norms, which were often expressed through newspapers and popular magazines. For example, newspapers published in the western provinces featured mothering advice columns, such as “Mother’s Number” and “Mother’s Experiences” (Green, 2017). Specifically, Albertan newspaper *Prairie Farmer* (July 1, 1909) published “Before the Baby Comes”—an article that exhorted women to exercise as well as eat fresh fruits and vegetables. Working, pregnant women likely lacked time to engage in the former, whereas women with limited financial income could not always afford the latter. The social mothering norms conveyed in these journals and newspapers thus implicitly excluded mothers who lacked the financial means to live up to the maternal standards of the day. Furthermore, childcare experts frequently endorsed familial gender norms and prescribed childcare rules orientated to middle-class, Anglo-European families (Arnup, 2013). However, many families

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<sup>2</sup> *Woman’s Century* also featured the work of other woman’s organizations, such as the IODE and the WCTU (“W.C.T.U. and Suffrage,” 1915, n.p.).

could not meet the financial threshold set by childcare experts, whose standards were often difficult to fulfill (Arnup, 2013). Consequently, maternal feminists informed by child-rearing norms often deemed “[p]oor women, single mothers, [and] working women” to be “defective” (p. 266).

The Canadian women’s journals of the early twentieth century painted a traditional picture of motherhood. Even after white women were enfranchised, maternal feminist columnists claimed that “the home is quite as much a woman’s sphere as ever; that, in fact, it is the sacred centre of that sphere, just as it always was and will be” (Bowker, 1918b, p. 30). However, also integral to this domestic picture was a nationalism concerned with preserving a declining Anglo-European population.<sup>3</sup> Since 1881, the Anglo-European birthrate had decreased due to tuberculosis, venereal disease, and war (Szreter & Schürer, 2019). The British marked these factors as the beginning of imperial decline. In Canada, pro-eugenicists also lamented the decline of the white population. For example, Canadian author and women’s rights activist Emily Murphy (1910) articulated the racial superiority felt by many white women: “the best peoples of the world have come out of the north, and the longer they are away from the boreal regions in such proportion do they degenerate” (n.p.). According to traditionalists, those who believed that women should first and foremost be homemakers and mothers, “New Womanhood” liberal feminists accelerated this decline by choosing independence over childrearing and household management (Devereux, 1999, p. 176). Additionally, the arrival of immigrants from Asia and other regions in the 1880s fuelled British and Anglo-Canadian fears of the decline of the Anglo-European “race” in Canada (Kalbach et al., 2022; Kinahan, 2008). Resultantly, children became an “asset” that mothers had to produce and protect as a national duty (Arnup, 2013, p. 249). Therefore, this period saw womanhood and motherhood inextricably linked to bearing children. A woman’s duty as a mother was twofold: to raise healthy children and to raise loyal Canadian citizens. Women’s publications provided ample advice on how to raise healthy children, in accordance with the high standards set by doctors and child-rearing experts. Ultimately, the traditional role of mothers to bear and raise model citizens made compliant mothers valuable assets to Canada’s nation-building efforts.

Maternal feminists did not question the assumption that women’s responsibilities were to their homes and families (Carter, 2020). In this way, maternal feminists confirmed society’s views on gender differences by portraying women as sensitive, selfless, and loving (LeGates, 2001). Using this portrayal, maternal feminists highlighted the sanctity of motherhood and, by the early 1900s, produced a national rhetoric that called on Anglo-European women to do their part by bearing children (Green, 2017). This calling was clearly articulated in the early twentieth-century journals of maternal feminists. For instance, a recurring column in *Woman’s Century* called “The Cradle and the Nation” expounded the duty of motherhood. Various short articles comprised the column including “The Children Are Our Hope” (1916), which emphasized that Canadian society must invest in children to create productive, patriotic adults:

To the children of this generation we owe everything. It is our duty to see to it that they have a better chance in the future than they have had in the past. Thousands of children in all our large cities have and are being shamefully neglected. Is it any

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnic data was not collected until 1901, though there were noticeable immigration losses in the last half of the nineteenth century, and many people left Canada for the United States between 1873 and 1896. Beginning in 1880, Canada received immigrants from both Europe and Asia. Anglo-Europeans in Canada likely noticed the slowed immigration rates from Britain and the arrival of a new Asian demographic, which bolstered their “fear” that the Anglo-European population was dwindling (Kalbach et al., 2022; Kinahan, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2015).

wonder that many of these same children now grown to manhood, feel they owe no duty or allegiance to a nation, which has cruelly neglected them? Children, who, if given a chance, would have become an asset, which any nation could glorify in ... builders and protectors of noble ideals and a great nation. (p. 20)

This forward-looking exhortation emphasized the collective nature of raising child. Furthermore, patriotic Canadians of Anglo-European heritage prized sons above all in Canada's nation-building efforts. Consequently, mothers were charged with cultivating sons who answered to the call-to-arms and performed as worthy rulers. In return, mothers used their sons as social currency, which reinforced the importance of their maternal role to gain social standing sufficient to obtain the vote. Mothers sent their sons to war and, in return, white, male society recognized their contribution to the war effort by granting certain women enfranchisement ("We Will Give Our Boys," 1915). As historian Dr. Sarah Glassford has noted in her discussion of the Red Cross propaganda poster titled "The Greatest Mother in the World," Canadian women used the mother figure in recruitment campaigns to translate their voluntary work and maternal sacrifice into "greater roles for themselves within the public sphere" (2008, p. 219). These images granted mothers social prominence and recognition not previously experienced. However, rhetoric extolling mothers who bore sons necessarily excluded mothers who bore daughters. Due to the fact that the negotiation for national citizenship and enfranchisement involved the currency of sons, mothers of daughters had less social clout. Similarly, the glorification of sons by maternal feminists excluded those who did not bear any children. Maternal feminists supported the traditional, nuclear family consisting of a father, mother, and offspring (Vickers, 2000). Hence, couples who could not conceive, and women who eschewed heteronormative societal expectations, were excluded from this family model (Vickers, 2000).

Explicit rhetoric lauding motherhood was also reinforced with less overt rhetoric that encouraged women to engage in nation-building. Women's periodicals supported national rhetoric calling on women to fulfill their motherly duty in subtle ways.<sup>4</sup> For example, articles supporting women's enfranchisement were often nestled among columns that dictated household management as well as advertisements for soap and baby products ("The Canadian Housewife," 1916; "Home Economics," 1916). Fictional pieces also emphasized the divinity of motherhood. For instance, over the course of multiple issues, *Woman's Century* released consecutive chapters of *The Motherhood of Nyria*—a novel by Gertrude Richardson (1916), who founded the Roaring River Suffrage Association. Later chapters of *The Motherhood of Nyria* hailed the historical strength and virtue of Christian women living in the first century C.E., when Rome was purportedly afflicted with degradation and excess. Richardson's final chapter "eulogised Nyria's beliefs" by stating that "every child was sacred to [Nyria] because of her own [children]" (Richardson, 1916, p. 17; Roberts, 1996, p. 189). The valorization of loving mothers by maternal feminists in texts such as *The Motherhood of Nyria* reinforced Canadian national rhetoric that required women to procreate and raise children. Such rhetoric was not limited to fictional stories published in *Woman's Century* during the early twentieth century; this rhetoric also underlaid advertisements in women's journals for "The Baby Welfare Weeks"—a national series of events that consisted of speakers and films expounding doctor-approved, up-to-date, child-rearing standards. A 1918 issue of *Woman's Century* described "The Baby Welfare Weeks" as a time dedicated to raising awareness on best practices for child-rearing. This series employed the slogan "better babies" to encourage mothers'

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<sup>4</sup> Early twentieth-century women's publications were not uniform in their views: while maternal feminism tended to dominate, liberal strains were also evident (see Perry, 1918).

participation. Proponents of “Baby Welfare Weeks” claimed that the maintenance of “better babies” was predicated on “[a] sense of justice, a sense of fitness, a sense of responsibility, a sense of patriotism, a sense of national aggrandisement [*sic*], common sense—and just a sheer love of children” (Bowker, 1918a, p. 11). These mothering ideals were highly publicized and entwined with the perceived national worth of women. Such advertisements also depended on a deeply engrained sense of motherhood and national duty.

The domestic picture painted by Canadian women’s journals of the early twentieth century excluded specific groups of women in its maternal rhetoric. Frequently, journal contributors called on white women to bear children to address a declining white population, primarily of Anglo-European descent. For example, one contributor to *Woman’s Century* challenged the government to “lend a hand” to this imperialist mission by increasing the number of Anglo-Europeans living in Canada (“The Woman and The Nation,” 1917, p. 7). This contributor noted that “women have been urged to do their part for the race...as a sacred national duty;” yet, she found that the Canadian government was failing in its supportive duty when she wrote that she “dream[ed] of a government that really wished to increase its population and who really believed that good citizens were as necessary a thing for the Empire as good roads” (p. 7). In sum, the domestic strain of motherhood was beset with the high standards implemented by society and child-rearing experts. This notion of motherhood excluded childless women (due to occupation, biology, or sexual preference), as well as those who did not have the socio-economic standing to raise children in a manner deemed socially acceptable. Additionally, due to the perceived importance of bearing sons as future leaders and soldiers, maternal feminists minimized the status of mothers who bore daughters. By excluding these groups, these journals suggested that such women were not valuable assets to Canada as a nation and, therefore, underserving of national citizenship and enfranchisement.

### **The Imperial Strain of Motherhood**

The ideal of motherhood that maternal feminists cultivated in women’s journals extended from the domestic to national domain. That is, motherhood was defined by colonial ideologies in a manner that excluded Indigenous women and non-white-presenting immigrants. Indeed, the former were conspicuously absent from early twentieth-century women’s journals, which echoed the eradication of Indigenous communities by white settlers. Also absent from early twentieth-century women’s journals were visible minorities: white settlers generally accepted white-presenting immigrants based on the colour of their skin, yet they tended to exclude visible minorities based on a belief in racial hierarchy. While maternal feminists had a traditional view of women’s roles in their homes, they supported reforms that would see women assume more prominent roles outside of their households. Namely, they wanted women to be able to “apply their special maternal and nurturing qualities to public life” (Carter, 2020, p. 32). In this way, maternal feminists did not limit motherhood to a biological concept; motherhood was also social and political. That is, women were thought to contribute to Canadian society an indispensable maternal knowledge capable of counteracting male aggression (LeGates, 2001). According to *Woman’s Century* contributor Agnes Maule Maohar, a mother’s role as a citizen was to consider the well-being of others: “A mothers’ self-sacrificing devotion to the infancy and development of the future citizen lies at the very foundation of the commonweal[th]” (1916, p. 9). Maohar’s articulation acknowledged that women played a role in the maintenance of society, yet she explicitly linked this role to motherhood. During the war, maternal feminists firmly believed that a maternal force could counteract male severity, and that women ought to marshal “the latent forces

of motherhood ... to construct the new social order upon the only secure basis, that of love, peace, brotherhood, and justice for all nations” (“Cradle and the Nation,” 1916, p. 20). Furthermore, the role of women would be essential in reconstructing society after the war, both inside and outside of the home. Reconstruction would not only require labour to help improve Canada economically but would also require hope and love to enable the country to heal spiritually (“The Cradle and the Nation,” 1916). Ultimately, traditional maternal qualities lent themselves to the rhetoric that surrounded post-war nation-building and, in turn, to arguments employed in the fight for women’s enfranchisement.

As maternal feminists joined the struggle for women’s enfranchisement, they insisted that women’s maternal nature made them indispensable to the governance of the nation: “Women would be the nation’s housekeepers, sweeping government of corruption and the streets and offices of the nation of immorality” (Arnup, 2013, p. 250). In this sense, maternal feminists viewed the nation as a macrocosm of the home, which both reinforced and replicated traditional domestic hierarchies (Devereux, 1999; Pickles, 2002). When speaking in favour of women’s enfranchisement, former Canadian Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier noted that women would likely vote for the same ballot options as their husbands: “Generally, the opinion of one member of the family is the opinion of all” (“Another Convert to Suffrage,” 1916, p. 5). So while maternal feminists envisioned an expanded role for women in the public sphere, that vision was still constrained by contemporary gender norms. The exaltation of maternal virtues by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century maternal feminists was also coloured by imperialism. Maternal feminists’ political ideal of motherhood envisioned white, Anglo-European, and middle- to upper-class women as the mothers of Canadian political leaders and citizens (Arnup, 2013; Green, 2017). Drawing on a growing eugenics movement, some maternal feminists believed that enfranchising white women would protect Canada against “race degeneration.” Pro-eugenic feminists, such as Emily Murphy, advocated for eliminating the “feeble-minded” and for sterilizing non-British immigrants (Carter, 2020, p. 33). Pro-eugenic maternal feminists who desired the vote were generally middle-class and Christian; correspondingly, they defined motherhood according to social, racial, religious, and cultural divisions to maintain the status quo (Green, 2017).

Both feminism and imperialism flourished amid concerns that the white race would diminish. The suffragist movement was deeply worried about preserving their “race,” and these fears were fed by Anglo-European population decline and non-white immigration (Devereux, 1999). Canadian suffragist and maternal feminist Nellie McClung articulated this relationship in her 1915 treatise, *In Times Like These*:

“the woman movement ... is a spiritual revival of the best instincts of womanhood—the instinct to serve and save the race. ... The world needs the work and help of the women, and women must work, if the race will survive.” (pp. 100–101)

Here, McClung’s description of an imperial “mother of the race” recalls the use of a similar trope throughout *Woman’s Century* (“Is it Just,” 1915). For example, the January 1916 column, “The Cradle and the Nation,” sought to put mothers throughout the British empire in contact with each other, to band them “together for mutual protection, enlightenment, and national welfare” (p. 10). In this way, the figure of the imperial mother promised to increase the Anglo-European population and raise healthy Anglo-European children to render Canada “morally hygienic” (Devereux, 1999, p. 178).

Anglo-European-Canadian maternal feminists argued that their social purity and Victorian maternal nature, which made them effective agents in the “British civilizing mission,” qualified them for active Canadian citizenship (Devereux, 1999, p. 178). Indeed, as evidenced by its frequent use in *Woman’s Century*, imperialism was not viewed as problematic (see Lang, 1916). Canada assured white women that they were morally superior to Indigenous women and charged the former with civilizing the empire “as they did their own children” (Devereux, 1999, p. 180). Similarly, *Woman’s Century* challenged mothers to preserve “the ethical standards and spiritual welfare of the race” (“National Council,” 1916, p. 5). One contributor, Bessie McLean Reynolds, stated that “it is the foundation of a suffrage mother’s teaching to her child to become a citizen,” which, thus, indicates the imbricated nature of motherhood, suffrage, and citizenship (1916, p. 10). In recognition of this interconnected relationship, at their 1917 annual meeting, the National Council of Women of Canada sought to educate their members on how best to exercise citizenship. In a keynote speech on “Nation Building,” and in subsequent discussions on the “Selection and Assimilation of New Citizens” and “Women as Citizens,” imperial sentiments invoked a politics of exclusion (Cummings, 1917, p. 4). The imperialist underpinnings of this feminist narrative were particularly hostile to Indigenous women. In early twentieth-century journals, maternal feminists excluded any mention of Indigenous peoples from conversations about motherhood, enfranchisement, and citizenship. Rarely did affluent, white women express their care for Indigenous women despite purporting to be caring mothers of the nation (Carter, 2020). Indigenous people were excluded from maternal feminist discourses regarding who qualified for enfranchisement because Anglo-Europeans viewed Indigenous cultures and ways of life as regressive and degraded (Carter, 2020).

In addition to aspiring to create a white nation, maternal feminists also sought to purify Canada both morally and socially. When suffragists wrote about Indigenous communities, they drew stark contrasts between Indigenous women and themselves. For instance, many Canadian-English settlers believed that Indigenous women neither understood nor desired women’s rights; instead, Indigenous women were thought to be without culture and content in their subjugation (Carter, 2020). According to many twentieth-century Anglo-European feminists, Indigenous women did not fit into the nation-building agenda; they were not “ideal mothers” and far less “ideal citizens.” As such, leading Anglo-European suffragists did not fight for Indigenous suffrage but, rather, supported the colonial goals of erasure and replacement (Carter, 2020). Although *Woman’s Century* supported the enfranchisement of Canadian immigrants internationally, and printed a recurring international column detailing feminist progress toward enfranchisement, suffragists (such as Emily Murphy, Henrietta Muir Edwards, Francis Marion Beynon, and Lillian Beynon Thomas) excluded Indigenous people from their campaigns (Carter, 2020). Indeed, little mention was made of Indigenous peoples in the fight for enfranchisement, and this absence of discourse indicates a preference to preclude Indigenous peoples from the political agency that came with social inclusion and enfranchisement.

In the early twentieth century, Canadians of British descent attempted to assimilate white-appearing Europeans who had immigrated to Canada while, at the same time, excluding from paths to citizenship immigrants perceived to be non-white (Vickers, 2000). Women-led publications, such as those launched by the NCWC and IODE, served as avenues for elite, white women to disseminate their views and gain more active public roles (Vickers, 2000). In this way, “majority-culture women” used these publications as vehicles for defining their cultural identity while further enshrining a politics of exclusion throughout Canada. Some contributors to women’s journals were

blatant in their exclusionary efforts. Indeed, in an article praising the effects of nationalism, one contributor asserted that harmony cannot be obtained through the pursuit of unity:

The facts are these: Nationalism has arisen once more with all its amazing vitality and we stand humbled before its magnificent enthusiasm, which proudly courts annihilation rather than surrender the right of the weak to exist as well as the strong. ... Only by realizing the unquenchable fire of patriotism, the right of each existent nation to work out its own salvation through its own idealism, can we hope to reach the ever-retreating goal of a peaceful world. It is not by unity, but by recognizing fundamental dissimilarity, that we may hope to attain harmony in our struggle towards the light. Canadian Nationalism is subservient to a more splendid heritage which has been victorious over time and space. British Imperialism, in which to-day Canada is one of the dominating factors, has been growing, slowly and painfully, through the centuries, and to-day has matured in a splendour of united thought and purpose, which transcends imagination. To Canadians, Nationalism and Imperialism are synonymous. (“Our Imperial Obligations,” 1915, p. 26)

At the outset, this excerpt appears to support an inclusive, diverse definition of nationalism since the author has purported to protect the “right of the weak.” However, any commitment to this vague goal is belied in the author’s discussion of nationalism in relation to imperialism. Linking Canadian nationalism to British imperialism, the author has denied agency not only to Indigenous communities but also to immigrants who do not appear to be British. Relatedly, contributors to *Woman’s Century* often portrayed immigrants as “parasites” (“The Immigration Problem,” 1916) or as an economic drain on society as “non-participants” in nation-building efforts.

When contributors to *Woman’s Century* defended “foreign women,” they were careful to use a narrow definition of “foreign.” For example, in an article recounting a speech by American settlement activist Jane Addams, foreign women of Irish and Italian descent were said to be “just like American women” (“Those ‘Foreign Women,’” 1915). Similarly, contributors to *Woman’s Century* celebrated the virtues of women with European heritage, whom contemporaries would have seen as white (see “Belgian Women to the Rescue,” 1915; “Economy of the Russians,” 1915; “Russian Women,” 1915; “Usefulness of Austrian Women,” 1915). In short, journal content revealed a marked preference for white-presenting immigrants. Although non-white minorities had neither a place nor a voice in publications such as *Woman’s Century*, one notable exception was a set of recurring articles titled “British Army” dedicated to Indian Sikhs. The appearance of this series might be explained by the deeply embedded colonial relationship between Britain and India. Indeed, most references to Sikhs related to their role in the army (“British Army,” 1915, p. 18). In this way, contributors viewed Sikhs as participating in nation-building efforts while serving alongside British troops. In sum, excepting Indian Sikhs, the absence of visible minorities from these publications mirrored the absence of Indigenous women from enfranchisement campaigns and the desired erasure of Indigenous populations in Canada. The lack of content concerned with Indigenous women and visible minorities echoed the broader attempts of white settler populations to erase marginalized groups nationwide. Indeed, the rhetoric used by white maternal feminists to secure their enfranchisement and place in public life was effective *because of* the racial biases that characterised Canada at that time.

## Maternal Feminism in Perspective

Contemporary scholarship has varied in its appraisal of the paths chosen by maternal feminists. Since the 1970s, second-wave and radical feminists have criticized maternal feminists for reinforcing patriarchal gender norms, such as strictly delineated gender roles, marriage, and child-rearing responsibilities (Green, 2017). Rather than accepting agency and enfranchisement at the cost of conceding to patriarchal norms, maternal feminists might have contested the premise of needing to supply a rationale to claim the franchise (Green, 2017; LeGates, 2001). In contrast, some scholars have lauded maternal feminists for achieving limited progress within a repressive society. Historian Dr. Marlene LeGates (2001) has argued that the sociopolitical realities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be disregarded, and that maternal feminists should be praised for their skillful adaptation of political and intellectual traditions previously monopolized by men. In proposing an alternative to a male-dominated society, maternal feminists created categories that eroded the foundations of patriarchal structures. In short, scholars (such as LeGates) have viewed maternal feminism as a necessary and incremental step within a broader feminist movement. However, such praise fails to acknowledge the exclusivity of maternal feminist ideologies related to nationalism and imperialism. The rhetoric used by maternal feminists deepened the gender, racial, and social divides that precluded marginalized group from actively participating in social and political life.

In particular, Indigenous feminists have critiqued the exclusivity of maternal feminism as an offshoot of white feminism, more generally. As Indigenous Canadian author and poet Lee Maracle (1996a) has contended, the racist ideology held by white colonial society threatened to push Indigenous woman into obsolescence. Maracle has articulated her frustration with contemporary feminism's exclusivity as follows:

That the white women of North America are racist and that they define the [woman's] movement in accordance with their own narrow perspective should not surprise us. White people define everything in terms of their own people, and then very magnanimously open the door to a select number of others. (1996b, p. 137)

Indeed, for many Indigenous women, “feminism as an ideology remains colonial” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 5). The feminist movement was crafted to address issues of concern to white, female, and middle-class members, which therefore marginalized issues pertaining to Indigenous women (Huhndorf & Suszack, 2010). Unlike maternal feminism, Indigenous feminism envisions a movement that recognizes and celebrates diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, and beliefs. Indigenous feminism also fights for physical and cultural survival. Distinguished scholar Lisa J. Udel (2001) has employed the concept of “motherwork” to give agency and autonomy to twenty-first-century Indigenous feminism (p. 47). “Motherwork” valorizes women's ability to bear and raise children, as well as their ability to nurture human communities and the Earth.

At first blush, the concept of “motherwork” seems to mirror the rhetoric of motherhood employed by maternal feminists in their fight for suffrage. However, here the term “mother” is not used in a literal or biological sense but is used symbolically to distinguish the Indigenous feminist movement from the white colonial feminist movement. Critics might also point to the gender biases connoted by the term “motherwork,” yet the use of the term “mother” by the Indigenous feminist movement is effective since it is used to contrast Indigenous and white movements by bringing to mind the gendered ideologies of maternal feminism. While it is admittedly easier to

judge a movement in retrospect, the failings of maternal feminism are nonetheless impactful. Maternal feminists did not simply work within the patriarchal, racial, and social constraints of the time; they reinforced an exclusionary rhetoric that entrenched gendered, racial, economic, and ethnic divides and, thus, made it more difficult for marginalized groups to overcome obstacles to citizenship and social belonging (Udel, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

In their sponsored journals, maternal feminists used the rhetoric of motherhood to justify their social position and enfranchisement, but their definition of motherhood was restrictive. According to maternal feminists, “mothers” did not include women unable to have children, nor women who lacked the resources to adhere to the mothering advice published by doctors and other child-raising experts. Also excluded from their definition of “mothers” were Indigenous women and non-white-presenting immigrants. The definition of motherhood crafted by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women’s organizations impacted both domestic and national domains. Domestic motherhood was defined by biological factors, social conventions, and child-raising standards. Women who could not live up to these ideals were excluded from the benefits of motherhood rhetoric used to justify enfranchisement. The national dimensions of motherhood were defined by colonialism and nationalism, which left little room for the participation of Indigenous women and visible minority immigrants. Women’s struggle for suffrage was an important milestone in the evolution of the women’s movement; however, the fight for women’s suffrage was also rooted in imperializing efforts to establish Canada as a white settler nation (Kinahan, 2008). Ultimately, it behooves contemporary readers to acknowledge that white women’s enfranchisement was a crucial prerequisite for their recognition as legal players and citizens, but this form of recognition was only possible because of the gender, race, and class prejudices that dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada.

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