

MOTHERING ALONE

A Plea for Opportunity

Mary Kay O'Neil



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*To my mother, Eileen,
who mothered three children alone*

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Acknowledgments

The stimulus which inspired this book came about in two phases. Through the generosity and encouragement of the mothers involved in the study and numerous colleagues and friends at each phase, *Mothering Alone: A Plea for Opportunity* has come to fruition. I want to acknowledge and thank those many people whose help made this endeavor possible.

The initial phase comprised the formal research. I gratefully extend my first thank you to the Chagnon Foundation of Montreal because, without their grant, the research on which the book is based would not have been possible. It is to Dr. William Lancee, my long-time collaborator, that a most sincere thank you is due for his astute consultation on research design, data analysis, and searching questions about the meaning of the findings. Others, such as Teresa Capel (President of the Board) and current and past Executive Directors of Project Chance, assisted me in making the findings meaningful within the context and history of Project Chance. A detailed report of the research findings, “Program Outcome Study, Contributors to Mother and Child Development,” was written separately for submission in English and French to Project Chance and the Chagnon Foundation (O’Neil, Capel, Hachey, 2008).

The recorded interviews kept niggling away at me. I felt the women's stories, told in their own words, had to be made known to a wider audience. It was the generosity, courage, and strength of the mothers, who told their story openly and honestly, that provided the true impetus of this book. They represent the many women mothering alone who struggle to achieve a good life for themselves and their children. As a psychologist and psychoanalyst, I also wanted to consider in writing what these women could teach about women's psychic development. Again, Bill Lancee provided stimulus: "Tell their story!" The acceptance of Phoenix to publish, assisted by their motto "Firing the Mind" and the persistent, gentle encouragement of Kate Pearce, continued to fire my mind. This motto stayed with me through the uncertainty of deciding from hundreds of transcribed pages which quotes best represented the women's situations and which stories best portrayed the lives of mothers alone with different degrees of vulnerabilities.

My thanks go to the insightful publisher Kate, to the astute editor James Darley, and the designer of the expressive cover, as well as to others at Phoenix who contributed but whose names are unknown to me. Dr. Rosemary Balsam, who has written in depth about women's development, wrote a lovely foreword, for which I am grateful. Dr. Salman Akhtar, my loyal and congenial co-editor on many books, not only introduced me to Phoenix but also gave continual encouragement and the opportunity to first present my work at the Margaret S. Mahler Symposium in Philadelphia (O'Neil, 2016). Many other colleagues and friends, Drs. Maxine Anderson, George Boujoff, Christine Dunbar, and Dorothy Markiewicz, as well as my sister, my brother, and their partners listened to my ideas and struggles, giving their time and patience to keep me persistent. To them, to my endorsers and others whom I may have missed, I express much heartfelt appreciation.

My deepest appreciation goes to my dear husband, Dr. Frederick Lowy, and to my adult children and their families. Fred was unstinting with his loving patience, reading and rereading, correcting and editing. My children and their families, with their "keep going mom and grandma," were always there. Thank you to my significant people.

About the author

Mary Kay O’Neil, PhD, is a supervising and training psychoanalyst and registered psychologist in private practice in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Trained at the Toronto Institute of Psychoanalysis, she received her PhD from the University of Toronto and was an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry. Currently, she is president of the North American Psychoanalytic Confederation (NAPsaC), a member of the board of the Toronto Psychoanalytic Society, and on the faculty of the Toronto Institute. Formerly, she served as director of the Canadian Institute of Psychoanalysis (Quebec English), Montreal, and was a North American representative on the board of the International Psychoanalytical Association (IPA). In addition, she was a member of a number of IPA committees, including ethics and publications and also on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. Author of *The Unsung Psychoanalyst: The Quiet Influence of Ruth Easser*, she co-edited seven other books and has contributed numerous journal articles as well as chapters and book reviews. Her research includes studies of depression, young adult development, sole-support mothers, the analyst as art collector, post-termination contact, and psychoanalytic ethics. Toronto and Montreal Foundations have funded her research activities.

Foreword

Mary Kay O’Neil, from Toronto, Canada, brings her many years of expertise as a sensitive, knowledgeable, and compassionate psychologist and psychoanalyst, to the study of what it is like to “mother alone.” Hers is a felicitous phrase. It is much more emotionally apt than the common term “single mothers.” That descriptor touches on how society unfairly disrespects such women because they are not coupled with men, and therefore are objects of suspicion—as if they somehow had engaged in foolish, deviant, and even immoral behavior, and now they deserved to face punishing consequences, such as in the stories of unwed mothers who were forced to give up their babies. O’Neil notes all this unfortunate history. She puts the emotional accent in the right place. Being solo in life, with one or more children as dependents, is a hard, uphill, lonely and exhausting—if also a potentially rewarding—task. How can such a woman find time or opportunity for further education? If she does not, though, her earning power will be automatically diminished, and she can all too easily fall afoul of the cycle of poverty many solo mothers face.

Hence, in Montreal, Canada, the sensible and humanitarian connection of such mothers to “Project Chance,” a program which supports

post-secondary education, and the emotional welfare and safety of these “sole-support” mothers. Dr. O’Neil was invited to study the efficacy of this program from 2006–2009. The qualitative research of recorded interviews is what inspires her present book.

The author has long nurtured in her professional work a special fascination with how women grow and develop. She signals that reading about women’s lives also expands her repertoire, and she uses examples of mothers, from novels, a memoir, and a movie. O’Neil’s female developmental theme has emerged from time to time, in amongst her long record of co-editing with Salman Akhtar many scholarly books about general psychoanalytic theory, under the auspices of the International Psychoanalytical Association. In addition, she has done yeoman work organizationally to support psychoanalysis, as well as carrying on her private practice and teaching; in short, she herself is a working, caretaking mother of four and of our field.

Her present book brings us back in time to her wonderful first and solo authored book about her personal analyst, Dr. Ruth Easser. Perhaps it is only my fantasy, but I think O’Neil’s first love is her profound interest in women’s lives, to which, later in her career, she now returns. She described the book on Ruth Easser as a part of mourning her lost analyst, to whom she was very admiringly attached. She had had only a few short years in analysis, cut short by Ruth’s unexpected death. The book, published in 2004, was also about experiences from the 1970s and before. O’Neil’s analyst bucked the trend of that earlier era’s presentation of psychoanalysis as an “objective” one-person science, turning towards the impact of the interpersonal connections. Her biographer analyst too was free to be “contemporary” in her interactive, intersubjective attitudes. She thus, for example, did not try to conceal her writing as a mourning process. Nor did she distance herself from it. She demonstrated a sublimation of her psychic work of internalization of this beloved mother-professional, even as she investigated her life and connections. She unfolded aspects of psychoanalysis’s evolution there as well.

This was an immersive participation in psychoanalysis as a “two-person” process, rather than the older, chillier, passing ideal of “one-person” systems. The latter I would take further as exemplary of the intellectual ideals of the phallogentrism that dominated a psychoanalytic

theory of “normality,” but that merely mirrored and mirrors society’s trends of misogyny and denigration of females. Female psychology certainly suffered from exceptionally distorted and stunted development in that era, up till about the 1980s. Dr. Easser’s main focus may not have been on females per se, and she did not write much, but O’Neil noted her panel contributions within national meetings, and her awareness of females qua female, there. Her study of Easser spoke poignantly to what life was like for a female analyst, in the more male professional world back then, and her struggles, joys, and tragedies.

Jumping to the present, Dr. O’Neil dedicates this book to her own mother, whom we learn was widowed at twenty-seven, a “mother alone” bringing up three children under three years old. Her father, posted to Europe when her mother was eight months pregnant, was killed in World War II six months later, and she stalwartly garnered more secondary education while looking after her growing little ones. She went to work as a teacher and librarian to support her family. So, the subtle threads of Mary Kay O’Neil’s autobiography are woven into these research textures and writing. And we are grateful for it, recognizing these days—along with my own last guru, Hans Loewald—incidentally also the child of a lone mother due to a father’s death—that the stuff of revisiting past experiences and deeply transforming them renders sublimation the very lifeblood of vitality for the psyche.

Dr. O’Neil has extremely interesting things to say about her lone mothers and lone parents. Her writing is a model of clarity and she is a pleasure to read. Back in 2004 she noted that “For Easser, empathy is not an echoing, but a resonance which does not distort, constrict, infantilize, or provoke emotional flight.” O’Neil’s whole emotional and intellectual grasp of growing womanhood, I believe, is imbued with this rich gift and brought to bear on her study. She tells her subjects’ stories eloquently, with her deep grasp of their strengths and dilemmas. The reader will discover in these pages the differences “Project Chance” made to them and their families. Hidden in here—offered effortlessly and organic to the text—is a lovely, fulsome, modern account of psychoanalytic ideas about female development, and the conditions for optimal and suboptimal emotional growth. I will not act as a “spoiler.” A reader will gain a lot of intimate knowledge from these marvelous case reports and commentaries, as well as the dynamic theory that accompanies her thinking at all times.

Mental health workers, including psychotherapists and psychoanalysts, and child educators should read this book, and policy-makers too should pay close attention. Mary Kay O'Neil's solo mothers are shown to sustain a powerful family force field of life that warrants great investment for the welfare of our future generations.

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Staff psychiatrist, Yale Student Mental Health and Counseling
Training and supervising analyst, Western New England
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Advancement of Psychoanalysis

Introduction

The seeds for this book were planted in a study I undertook in 2006 to 2009 into sole-support mothers in Canada involved in a program to facilitate their post-secondary education. The program, “Project Chance,” focused on providing the opportunity for women mothering alone to have post-secondary education which would not have been available to them otherwise. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the program’s efficacy and I was asked to be the principal investigator. I felt the study opened up a fascinating and underexplored window on the position and needs of women alone with children in contemporary society. Thinking about my mother’s story (Appendix I) and being a child raised by a single parent provided further motivation for my interest in writing about women mothering alone.

Single motherhood is, of course, not a new phenomenon. However, in the last few decades with the evolving recognition of women’s rights it is a newly accepted kind of mothering. Mothering alone is not restricted to single women; many married women find themselves in the position of having to mother children on their own. Husbands and fathers can be absent due to abandonment, divorce, death, or resulting from father-debilitating circumstances such as accidents, war, emigration, and, more

frequently now, migration. Since the two world wars of the twentieth century, more women are in the workforce and able to earn their own money. Despite this societal acceptance of women working, it remains difficult to balance motherhood and work, especially without sufficient education, finances or resources, and assistance from a partner, parents, or others outside the immediate family. Parenthood—having and raising a child—is a life’s work which invokes intense ambivalent feelings—love, devotion, frustration, competitiveness, humor, even tragedy. Yet, sole-support mothers, whether single or alone through other circumstances, have an even more daunting task in contemporary society. Statistics worldwide show that women mothering alone are on the increase, and they all face similar challenges. Frequently they are a vulnerable, disadvantaged, and poverty prone group who present a widespread societal problem. Many single mothers come from families with long-standing dependence on the welfare system and often exhibit a high degree of social and emotional problems. Without adequate opportunity and support, an inter-generational cycle of dependence can persist with negligible opportunity for improvement in family life.

A brief note on my definition of motherhood seems warranted: “Motherhood” is not necessarily gender related—men can “mother” and women can “father.” In other words, both genders can fulfill either parenting role when necessary or by choice. A man can be left to parent alone through choice or circumstance. Men may be in similar situations as women parenting alone, and as such some aspects of this book may be relevant for them, but men parenting alone also face different challenges which are not discussed here. The same can be said of people in same gender relationships, of those identifying as non-binary or those who choose to change their birth gender. These parents too can face challenges similar to and different from those discussed here. Indeed, for anyone, parenthood is a challenging role.

Adrienne Harris (2008) suggests that, as our understanding of gender evolves, the functions of parenting can be performed by all genders. In support of this notion, she states: “As functions like containment, authorizing sexuality, paving a way to separation and autonomy, cultivating dependency and regression get dislocated from gender, become more gender agnostic, many other features of character and subjectivity may carry these psychic and intersubjective functions; generational

differences, rather than more strictly gender differences, may be more prominent” (pp. 54, 55). However, only a biological female can become pregnant and give birth; only a woman, once pregnant, can choose to carry her pregnancy to full term. Once she has a child, a woman can now have the option of deciding whether or not to mother alone. Furthermore, a woman mothering alone most often has to be both father and mother.

As well as examples from my research of women mothering alone, I have brought in stories from fiction, memoirs, biographies, and clinical examples from my own practice. The women in the study who were hampered by limited resources are contrasted with examples from literature of women facing various challenges in different decades but with sufficient internal and external resources to raise their children alone. A person’s capacity to adapt includes all aspects of their physical, psychological, and socio/cultural conditions, and therefore, biopsychosocial factors as well as practical needs and self-development wishes must be taken into account.

I also focus on the psychological understanding of women related to the developmental implications of giving birth and of a woman’s decision to take responsibility to raise her child(ren) on her own. Theories of women’s development have been drawn primarily from psychotherapeutic case examples and rarely include contributions from the life experiences of other women mothering alone. I am convinced that much can be learned about a woman’s psychological development from examples of how sole-support mothers manage their own and their children’s lives despite difficult, even traumatic life experiences.

Women with few resources who mother alone are the primary focus here; the texture and relevance of their parenting situation are provided by their backgrounds and relationships, their social conditions, their current circumstances, their problems, needs, and opportunities to improve their own and their children’s lives. The UNICEF report (2006) in “The Year of the Woman” affirmed the need for such a focus: “The lives of women are inextricably linked to the well-being of children. If they are not educated, if they are not healthy, if they are not empowered, the children are the ones who suffer.”

This book considers what can be learned about women’s development from the women in my study who, in their own words, described their early and current life experiences. It is divided into three parts:

Part I—Societal attitudes, research, and motherhood—comprises six chapters: Chapter 1 considers the societal and attitudinal changes towards single motherhood which have occurred over time, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Chapter 2 describes the relevance of my study to the focus of the book. Research findings are in Appendix II. Chapter 3 focuses on the maternal tasks involved in raising a child. Chapter 4 touches on the women's experience of becoming mothers as well as the various influences on their decision to give birth and mother alone. Chapter 5 describes the women's own parental and relational experiences with their partners, the fathers of their children, and with others. Chapter 6 further portrays how these women develop through examples of their life stories.

Part II—Maternal growth—addresses resilience (Chapter 7), autonomy (Chapter 8), and caring (Chapter 9). I consider these three characteristics basic to effective mothering.

Part III—Development of mothers alone—considers what has been learned in the light of current psychological understanding (Chapter 10), and Chapter 11 outlines society's role in providing, for women mothering alone, the opportunity to become successful mothers.

The Afterword (Chapter 12) offers the reader a summary of what was learned through the generosity, openness, and sincerity of the women on whose contributions much of this book is based. Although improvements in societal attitudes and opportunities for women on their own with children have occurred over the years, much more needs to change. I hope to underline, as well, the need for further improvements and increased opportunity. This book, therefore, is about the status, the role, the development, and the challenges of women with few resources who mother alone in the Western world, what they need to succeed, what they contribute to the understanding of the development of women in general, and the necessity for further societal changes and opportunity. As a psychoanalyst, I also consider what these women contribute to the understanding of women's development within psychoanalytic theory.

“This carefully argued and deeply moving book gives a powerful picture of the challenge to women electing to raise a child on their own. Many personal elements in a woman’s life make a difference: education, resources, intergenerational support, and, perhaps above all, personal resilience, and psychological strength. Mary Kay O’Neil’s work here also makes a clear case for the need for serious and deep social supports. Mothering alone works best in cultures that provide supports in respectful and deeply compassionate ways. This is a book to learn from, whether the reader is a clinician, a teacher, a parent, or a bystander. Mothering alone is daunting work that needs all our support.’

Adrienne Harris, New York University

“This excellent book on mothering alone centres on the author’s interviews with women from a program that gave single mothers and their children help with lodging and education. The voices of the women shine through and illuminate many facets of the experience: social and economic aspects, family and traumatic issues, resilience, and much else. Skillfully interwoven with these moving comments are examples from clinical practice and literature, and discussions of the biological, psychological, and social aspects of mothering alone. This impressive book has much to offer anyone with professional or other interest in the topic of mothering alone.’

**Joseph Fernando, MPsych, MD, Director, Toronto Institute
of Psychoanalysis**

‘Mary Kay O’Neil, a psychoanalyst with a background in social work and psychology, describes her research in a Canadian programme designed to help those “mothering alone,” and combines these research findings with her own deep understanding of psychoanalytic literature, focusing on (amongst other topics) infant and child development, the development of sexuality, the female psyche, the pain(s) and pleasure(s) of pregnancy, childbirth, and of adults remaining together and separating.

‘The text is richly illustrated by fictional and factual accounts from literature and film, as well as from her own psychoanalytic clinical practice and her research interviews. Always respectful of the multiplicity of influences which can help or hinder healthy growth, she focuses on what helps, what is needed, what are the factors which can allow a mother to care for her child, to allow them both to flourish. There is hope everywhere in this book, but the hope is not naive or trite, it is a recognition of the powers of resilience, autonomy, and the capacity to care even under extremely difficult circumstances.

‘Subtitled “A plea for opportunity,” this volume makes a strong case for the importance of attending to both internal and external factors in order to give the best possible hope to mothers, their children, and those who will follow in future generations. This is a thought-provoking, compassionate, and important book which I can unreservedly recommend.’

**Dr Julian Stern, FRCPsych, Consultant Psychiatrist in Psychotherapy,
psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and formerly Director of Adult and Forensic
Services, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London**

“This important book gives a much-needed voice to the challenges faced by those who “mother alone.” Such mothers are often among the most vulnerable or marginalized members of our society. Frequently, they do not have the resources central to nurturing children effectively. Mary Kay O’Neil powerfully illustrates the need for and benefit of providing opportunities for mothers to develop those resources. A mother who takes the opportunity to improve her circumstances will also improve the circumstances of her children, and in doing so will benefit the future of our society. *Mothering Alone: A Plea for Opportunity* should be read widely. It is an important book for those whose work and interests touch on the lives of these families, including those involved in child protection, education, and governance. This book bears witness to the strength of women who parent alone, to their resilience, and to their courage and tenacity in trying to do their best for their families. Society must give these mothers opportunity to achieve that best.’

Susan E Lang, retired judge of the trial and appellate courts of Ontario