

# Maternal Feminism and Domestic Workers

The case of domestic workers in Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals a complicated relationship between the maternal feminists and the women who worked in their homes. Domestic workers faced strict control at the hands of maternal feminists, based on racism and classism often disguised as moral expectations. The maternal feminist movement favoured reforms that benefited middle class, Anglo-Saxon Canadians, rather than striving for equality for all women.

## Who were the maternal feminists?

The term “maternal feminists” refers to a group of women involved in the first wave of feminism, fighting for their right to vote in Canada. They were racialized as white, and could trace their ancestry to Britain, an identity they would describe as “Anglo-Saxon.” They were primarily middle class women. They often employed domestic workers to take over household tasks and childcare, providing them time to campaign for women’s rights, and other policies they believed would make Canada into a strong Anglo-Saxon nation.

### Identifying “the race”

In the context of maternal feminism, this term was mainly used to refer to Anglo-Saxon, middle class people. It created a hierarchy, where the term was used by those who could identify with it to refer to themselves as superior and evolved. All those outside this group, including those racialized as others, and individuals belonging to a different class were seen as less human.

## Key ideas of the maternal feminists

The ideas and reforms favoured by maternal feminists centered around the protection of “the race” and the creation of an “Anglo-Saxon nation” in Canada.

**Identity as the “mother of the race.”** Anglo-Saxon women gave birth to and raised Anglo-Saxon children. They argued that their role as mothers gave Anglo-Saxon women a unique ability to create and protect the future of “the race.” They supported this using environmentalist evolutionary theory, which suggested that by improving the environment (for example, through moral reform) they could create physical and mental changes in individuals that could be transmitted to future generations. They considered reproduction by women who did not belong to the Anglo-Saxon middle class a potential threat to Canada, which they wanted to be an Anglo-Saxon nation.

**“The heavy emphasis on women's role as moral teachers of children, however, privileged those women whose cultural and racial background marked them as more adult, more evolved, more moral, and better 'mothers of the race.'”**  
Mariana Valverde.

Using ideas about race, morality, and motherhood, maternal feminists excluded those of different classes and ethnicities from full participation in the feminist movement, and any rights they hoped to gain.

## Impact on policy

The maternal feminists needed free time to participate in the public sphere, but they also had children who required full-time care. They often employed domestic workers to care for the house and the children.

The maternal feminists were concerned with the moral environment of their homes, and therefore the morality of the domestic workers who entered it. They became involved in policymaking about domestic workers to try to exercise more control over the workforce. They were particularly concerned with the religion, sex life, relationship to drugs and alcohol, and health of domestic workers.

Maternal feminists **promoted the recruitment of British domestic workers**, claiming that because of moral values, they made the best domestic workers.

Maternal feminists **supported strict morality and background checks on incoming domestic workers**.

Maternal feminists **maintained temporary shelters for landed foreign domestic workers**. In those shelters, they enforced moral expectations including bans on drugs, alcohol, and romantic relationships.

Overall, they used **policy about domestics to promote moral reform ideas** and **exercised control over the composition of the domestic workforce** using perceived immorality as justification for racial and class exclusion.

## Life as a domestic - a comparison between British and Caribbean domestic workers

There have been “significant variations in the status and conditions of domestic workers based on their relationship to membership in the Canadian state... and within the socially constructed 'imagined community' of the Canadian nation.” Sedet Arat-Koc.

The lives of domestic workers were shaped by ideas about race, class, morality, and femininity spread by the maternal feminists. The similarities and differences between British and Caribbean domestic workers demonstrate how these ideas operated and intersected to create unique situations for different groups of domestic workers.

### British domestic workers

British domestic workers were brought to Canada with the assumption that they would eventually marry and start families, creating a larger Anglo-Saxon population.

British domestic workers had more opportunities for citizenship in Canada. This gave them more control over working arrangements. Citizens could choose to work in factories, department stores, and more. Foreign workers were limited to domestic employment, especially at times when there was a high demand for domestic labour with little supply within Canada.

### Caribbean domestic workers

The reproductive capacity of Caribbean domestic workers was seen as a liability. Racial assumptions led policy makers to presume that Caribbean women made “unfit mothers” and if they had children in Canada they would become a burden to the state.

With little to no access to citizenship, Caribbean domestic workers would be deported if they lost their jobs. In poor economic times, they would be the first deported to provide jobs for citizens.

Regardless of country of origin, domestic workers were held to middle class moral standards that they often could not or refused to comply with. This led to the incarceration and deportation of many women. Common reasons included abortions, the use of drugs or alcohol, and stealing, many of which were necessary ways that domestic workers navigated their circumstances.

## Conclusions

*The lives of domestic workers were impacted by the imposition of ideas about morality, race, and motherhood by maternal feminists. While the maternal feminists relied on the labour of domestic workers, they also excluded women of different backgrounds from their movement and worked to privilege or disadvantage groups of domestic workers, often based on racist and classist assumptions.*

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