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A Maternal Brand of Environmentalism: Carol Browner's Gendered Leadership of the Environmental Protection Agency

On 11 December 1992, Carol Browner became the second woman to head the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), behind the short-lived and arguably detrimental tenure of Anne Gorsuch in the early 1980s. Browner was the first in this position to be appointed to the Cabinet.[1] Prior to her appointment, the handful of women who had reached this ranking had been named primarily to departments associated with traditional feminine gender roles such as Health and Human Services (HHS) and Labor and Education. Everything else was considered of masculine expertise. In his effort to create an administration "that looks like America," President William J. Clinton gave almost a third of his executive positions to women and made a record-breaking fourteen appointments of women to Cabinet positions across his two terms.[2] Alongside another female colleague, Hazel O'Leary, whom Clinton appointed Secretary of the Department of Energy, Carol Browner became one of the first female voices to be included within those responsible for making decisions on national environmental policy.

Scholars have long acknowledged the important relationship between gender and environmental issues. Since the 1970s, for example, ecofeminists have argued that there exists a link between women's oppression and the destruction of nature. Because of this and women's innate and socially constructed reproductive roles, ecofeminists believe that women are closer to nature and possess the characteristics and the unique qualification to "mother" the Earth and right men's environmental wrongs.[3] Sociologists, too, have conducted comparative gender polls showing the connection between environmental concern and gender socialization. Women's socialization into roles as caregivers, they argued, encouraged a mentality of nurture and protection extending towards nature, leading to greater concern of the environment and an increased likelihood of engaging in environmentally friendly movements compared to men.[4] Environmental historians, such as Nancy C. Unger and Joni Seager, have endorsed these claims, showing that women have been less

likely to support environmental spending cuts and the buildup of nuclear arms, but more supportive of tough environmental regulations and environmental health protection.[5]

While research into environmental activism and grassroots campaigning has increasingly included gender analysis in its methodology, studies of executive environmental politics have thus far failed to do so. The work of ecofeminists and historians suggests that given women are more likely to support environmental movements and environmentally friendly behaviors, their increased representation in executive environmental politics would have a positive influence on the American environment. Yet – aside from the activism of Lady Bird Johnson, especially her influence over the Highway Beautification Act – scholars have paid little attention to the influence of the women at the height of this decision-making, including Administrator Browner. According to former EPA executives, such as Gerald Andrews Emision, environmental protection is not only an "extraordinarily complex" and diverse task but also an increasingly polarized issue – a "touchstone for political conflict".[6] As an executive taking over leadership on this issue, as well as the first woman in her position in the Cabinet, careful study of Browner's influence over policy can provide valuable insights into the fields of gender studies, environmental politics, and executive leadership.

This article thus delves into this understudied arena, assessing the impact of gender at the height of US environmental decision-making and its effects on the Clinton administration's environmental priorities and initiatives. Focusing on a selection of Browner's key priorities, it will show that Browner articulated a maternal analysis of environmental issues, creating a "new generation of environmental protection – protection that emphasizes the newest generation of Americans".[7] Her different perspectives, priorities and life experiences – as a woman and a mother – to the men who previously dominated environmental politics translated into distinctive concerns and policies, transforming the focus and development of the nation's environmental politics.

Maternal ideology claims moral authority, security, and political voice based on women's work as mothers and nurturers. Maternalists, as Molly Ladd-Taylor urges, cannot be properly

considered feminists, although the two did coexist and sometimes overlap. Unlike feminism, which sought to challenge the social order, demanding women's individuality, political participation, and economic independence, the maternal ideology was rooted in the nineteenth-century doctrine of separate spheres, understanding women's responsibilities through the lens of motherhood and seeing care and nurturance as distinctly feminine values.[8] Maternalists, according to Lisa Brush, believed in "mother-work" – the selfless protection and moral and emotional training of children.[9] They held that women were united across race and class by motherhood and therefore shared responsibility for the nation's children. Maternalism was thus associated with an ethic of care that transferred to the fostering and nurturing of others so that women became what Jennifer Peeples and Kevin DeLuca have termed "othermothers".[10] Browner, this article argues, applied this concept to her environmental attitudes and decision-making as leader of the EPA. In this way, she was following a long-standing trend in women's environmental activism.

Maternalism and environmental activism in the US

The interplay between gender and the American environment has proved a burgeoning field of study in the past few decades, and the notion of a maternal ideology has received considerable attention. An increasing body of literature highlights that while their environmental leadership has been constrained to the non-political world, historically and culturally diverse women have played an indispensable role in the environmental movement through myriad forms of environmental activism, as both leaders and foot soldiers. A flourishing of both biographical works and comprehensive studies of women's contributions to environmentalism demonstrate that women have excelled in their efforts as botanists, nature-writers, climbers, gardeners, conservationists, anti-nuclear activists, and much more.[11] As historian Glenda Riley writes, "environmentalism would have been far less effective had it not been for the thousands of women who supported it."[12] Many of these women were successful thanks to their use of the motherhood ideology, adopting maternalism as a source of motivation, justification, and empowerment. While women's experiences

of activism have varied according to multiple factors – including race, class, age, sexuality and religion – gender, and particularly maternalism, has played a visible role throughout the history of environmental activism in the US.[13] Women have consistently invoked traditional feminine roles – assigned to them by American society since the nineteenth century – concerning the protection of future generations as a powerful rhetorical force to mobilize others in environmental activism and to exert moral and political authority over environmental issues.

In *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers,* Nancy C. Unger assessed how the intersections of sex, sexuality, and gender shaped women's environmental concerns and activism from the Wild West and the expansion of the frontier to the Cold War and the environmental justice movement. In the early nineteenth century, women began to see that their domestic roles within their "proper" sphere of True Womanhood – where they were considered morally and spiritually superior to men – could act as an advantage.[14] Arguing in 1850 that nature essentially functioned as a home, writer and naturalist Susan Fenimore Cooper claimed that women bore moral obligations to domesticate, conserve, and preserve the wilderness for the benefit of themselves and future generations.[15] As an extension of their domestic caregiving responsibilities, women were widely accepted as the nation's natural civilizers. Seeking to protect the nonhuman world for their children, women campaigned to improve urban areas and immersed themselves in nature study. Thus, according to Unger, their "surrender to domesticity did not doom women to a life of powerless drudgery" but offered them more powerful and autonomous roles within the home. The prescribed female sphere in fact set the foundations that enabled women for many generations to come to assert "environmental authority" as caretakers of the nation's homes and families.[16]

There are copious studies on the impact of the maternal ideology on environmental activism during the Progressive Era – a time when motherhood became an "overtly political concern".[17] Historians including Carolyn Merchant, Adam Rome and Unger have argued that during this period many middle-class women poured their energies into environmental activism and municipal

housekeeping. Forbidden from voting and holding positions of formal power, women embraced their roles as domestic housekeepers and maternal caregivers to claim a unique qualification to right the nation's environmental ills. As self-styled conservation writer Lydia Adams-Williams declared in 1908, "Man has been too busy building railroads, construction ships, engineering great projects, and exploiting vast commercial and financial enterprises" to concern themselves with saving "from rapacious waste and complete exhaustion the resources upon which depend the welfare of the home, the children, and the children's children." This, she claimed, had been left for women "and it is conclusively a field where her care and love and devotion to all that makes for the betterment of humanity will find ample scope for."[18] Justifying their efforts as extensions of their traditional feminine duties, women set out to protect and conserve the nation for their children and grandchildren. They became nature writers, scientists, campers and botanists. They became activists and joined women's organizations such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), founded in 1890 and made up almost entirely of full-time mothers and homemakers. They climbed the ranks of mixed organizations including the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society. They lobbied Congress and state legislatures, publicized preservation and pressed for children's educational programs on the environment. Ultimately, women extended their maternal roles beyond the confines of the home and into the nonhuman world – to concerns for preserving nature, reducing pollution and pesticide use, creating natural parks, saving bird species, and protecting rivers and wildlife. They became nature's housekeepers.[19]

Towards the end of the Progressive Era, women found their efforts undermined by men who feared their masculinity was being threatened by women's evermore powerful sentimental and effeminate campaigning. Men increasingly rejected women's involvement in the male world of environmental authority. They discarded the rhetoric used by women about the moral and cultural value of places of beauty, emphasizing instead the economic and production benefits of preserving landscapes. With the end of the era of progressive reform, women's visibility in mixed gender professional environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club declined dramatically.[20] Their

environmental activism did not wane, however. According to Rome, a key consequence of the Progressive Era was to initiate a growing divide between professional reformers – mostly men – and grassroots activists – mostly women.[21] Throughout the twentieth century, therefore, women continued to claim the right to enter the public sphere as nature's housekeepers.

Unger has highlighted how women, alongside using their vote – which they gained in 1920 – asserted influence over environmental matters through the limited paths open to them by their socialized gender roles, such as education and leisure. In 1912, for instance, Juliette Gordon Low established the Girl Scouts of America, instilling girls with the notion that their innate qualities left them with unique obligations and expertise on the protection, conservation, and defense of the natural world.[22] The GFWC also remained active throughout the 1920s, campaigning for the principle essentials of successful homemaking – running water, proper sewage, waste disposal, energy consumption.[23] And the League of Women Voters, founded in 1920, played an integral role in environmental conservation. Terrianne Schulte has argued that the League acted as a bridge between women's Progressive-era activism and the modern environmental movement in the US. By employing the political strategies of the municipal housekeepers, arguing that the environment was an extension of the home, the League provided a political identity and education for women at a time when their public roles were restricted by gender norms. Women were able to lobby government on environmental issues such as water resources and raise public awareness of environmental issues, subsequently fueling the post-war environmental movement.[24]

During the Cold War, women, mostly middle-class mothers, increasingly protested the use of nuclear power and the dangers of toxic radiation. The emergence of women's groups such as the League Against Nuclear Dangers and Women Strike for Peace reflect a continuation of prescribed gender values and women's perceived dedication to home and children, particularly at a time when the fight against Communism saw the return to True Womanhood and nuclear families as a political necessity.[25] The WSP, who held a fifty thousand strong women's march against the testing of nuclear

weapons in 1961, identified as “concerned housewives” and held in high regard those such as journalist Agnes Meyer who asserted that women could have multiple careers but one vocation – motherhood. According to Amy Swerdlow, they rallied to the WSP as a space in which their “maternal stance” could be translated into research, speeches, political strategies and campaigns that could change male authorities without interference.[26] They perfectly expressed the maternal ideology in their “Pure Milk Not Poison” campaign. One activist claimed that when mothers gave their children breakfast, they feared giving them the chemicals released by nuclear explosions: they saw “not only Wheaties and milk” but also “strontium 90 and iodine 131 … They feared for the health and life of their children.”[27]

In the 1970s, working-class women became some of the most successful in campaigning for environmental justice issues. While race and class have been the predominant drivers of the environmental justice movement, gender – more specifically maternalism – has played a critical role. Women activists used their roles as mothers and housewives to recruit others in their fight against environmental toxins, creating what journalist Mark Dowie described as a “new class of activist – the angry mother”.[28] Rejecting the modern feminist rhetoric, they cited their political activism as motivated by their concerns over children, families and communities.[29]

Women have evidently made recurrent reference to motherhood in their environmental activism throughout American history. The maternal ideology has shown to be an enduring framework for environmentalism, transcending historical periods as well as cultural and social conditions. Due to women’s exclusion from executive political office, however, maternalism was limited to use as a political strategy among grassroots women’s campaigners. The women active in the environmental arena prior to the 1990s in the US largely tackled environmental issues in their own backyard, in grassroots and community-based organizations outside of the formal structure of environmental politics. Browner, then, as one of the first women to sit at the height of this structure,

was one of the first to incorporate a maternal ideology into the upper echelons of US environmental political thinking.

Carol Martha Browner

As Administrator of the EPA, an institution established in December 1970 by President Richard M. Nixon, Carol Browner headed the biggest independent regulatory body in the nation. The Agency's workload increased since its formation so that it was responsible for legislation concerning diverse environmental issues including water and air pollution control, pesticide and toxic waste management, and environmental radiation. When Carol Martha Browner was confirmed by the Senate as the eighth EPA administrator on 21 January 1993, she thus took on what Senator Max Baucus called "one of the most difficult jobs in Government."[30] Despite efforts by previous Administrators to restart enforcement programs after the destructive Reagan era, Browner presided over an Agency criticized for poor management, disorganization and inefficiency, and distrusted by Congress and the American public. She headed a policy arena which had for several years been paralyzed by partisan gridlock. And she repeatedly fended off attempts by the anti-environmental Congress to undermine EPA policies and funding.[31] Nonetheless, Browner pledged in her Senate confirmation hearing to set a "new standard of cooperation and communication between Congress and the EPA" as well as between businesses and environmentalists. Many in the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works seemed enthused with Browner's nomination, believing she brought with her a new sense of commitment and experience of environmental protection.[32] Journalists and scholars described Browner as smart and pragmatic, and a rapid learner. Unlike her predecessors, she came to the post with experience not only of environmental law and politics but also of state government and both congressional and regulatory enforcement.[33]

Born in Miami, Florida, on 16 December 1955, Browner was a child of the new 1960s generation of environmental awareness. She grew up just a short distance from the Everglades, a diverse wetland which instilled in her the importance of environmental responsibility. After

graduating with a law degree from the University of Florida, Browner worked for a year as General Counsel for the Florida House Committee on Governmental Operations. In 1983, she became Associate Director for the activist group Citizen Action. She entered the world of politics in 1986 as Senator Lawton Chiles's chief legal aide for environmental issues, where she was a key player in negotiations to expand the Everglades Big Cypress National Preserve and to develop an oil-drilling ban off the Florida Keys. When Chiles left the Senate, Browner moved to Tennessee to become senior legislative director for then-Senator Al Gore. In 1991, she returned to Florida to lead the Department of Environmental Regulation, gaining high praise for her effective work in complex issues such as hazardous waste disposal, wetland protection, and cleanup of the Everglades. According to Chiles, Browner "pioneered a new brand of environmentalism" at this department, envisioning economic development and environmental protection as compatible.[34] In 1992, Al Gore asked her to join President-elect Clinton's transitional team on environmental issues, and on 11 December, Clinton announced her nomination as Administrator to EPA. According to Clinton, while he had not known Browner before he interviewed her, he was "impressed with her" and "Al Gore wanted her to have the job." [35] Carol Browner served for the full eight years of Clinton's presidency, becoming – and remaining – the longest serving administrator in EPA history.

A maternal brand of environmental politics

During her tenure at EPA, Browner gained a reputation as a "vociferous champion of federal environmental programs." She was strident in pushing her position and won the respect of what she considered an "often-fickle environmental community."[36] Significantly, under Browner's leadership, the Agency underwent an important paradigm shift. As she stated during a 1995 Committee on Environment hearing, she tried to forge "a new generation of environmental protection, a strong commitment to protection of the public's health and our natural resources, combined with innovation, common sense and flexibility."[37] She moved the Agency away from primarily controlling pollution, aiming to safeguard the nation's health, particularly those most vulnerable such as

children. It is in these efforts that the most prominent manifestation of the maternal ideology can be seen. In her confirmation hearing, for example, Browner stated: "I want my son Zachary and his children to grow up and enjoy the same natural wonders that we have all enjoyed."[38] Her identity as a woman, a mother and a caregiver undeniably enabled her to create not only what Chiles labelled as a "new brand of environmentalism," but a maternal brand of environmental politics.

The strength of maternalism in the 1990s might seem somewhat surprising, when social and technological changes had by then challenged the meaning of gender roles, creating increasingly egalitarian norms within the family, career, and marriage. Yet, while ideals of fatherhood have been frequently reconceptualized and historically varied, changing from distant breadwinner, to moral leader, to secondary or co-parent, womanhood and motherhood were still predominantly treated as near synonymous. The largely unchanging mothering ideology has been that of a nurturing, self-sacrificing, caregiving woman. Even while becoming more agentic and high earning in the contemporary workforce, women were still the primary caregivers within the family and still bore a disproportionate responsibility for children and the vulnerable.[39] Associations such as The La Leche League, who by the mid-1980s were considered as a primary source of expertise on motherhood in the US, still championed traditional domesticity. The League, for example, defined motherhood by "female" qualities such as the "womanly art of breastfeeding," arguing that on-demand breastfeeding is what could facilitate women reaching their full potential. To meet the League's standards, mother and baby must therefore remain together. Thus, while appropriating the language of feminism in urging women to reclaim control of their bodies through natural childbirth and breastfeeding, it largely rejected feminist philosophy. Instead it restricted women's roles outside of the home, challenging maternal employment and reaffirming housewifery and full-time parenting as the key to "good mothering".[40]

The mothering ideology has thus remained pervasive. Some feminists have critiqued the maternal ideology, understanding motherhood as a socially constructed experience that should be

linked with women's oppression and social control.[41] However, others such as Martha McMahon argue that women's maternalism is a result not only of gendered divisions of labor and caregiving, but also of gendered consciousness. While women are not a homogeneous unit, McMahon found that they frequently expressed greater salience for parental identities than men. Implicit in this was a belief that their children's well-being was directly linked to their caregiving. As a result of women's more frequent contact with children, then, they were often both more concerned over their children's health and able to more rapidly identify health issues and their causes, recognizing the links to environmental health hazards. [42] Just as the women environmental activists who came before them, women in the 1990s were thus still able to claim a unique authority when it came to issues of the environment and public health.

Browner did just that in the world of executive environmental politics. In 1997, she claimed that in her "dual responsibilities as the mother of a nine-year-old and as EPA Administrator, I have become especially familiar to how children suffer disproportionately from environmental hazards."[43] At a time when masculinist ideology dominated executive leadership, Browner capitalized on her identity as a mother and caregiver to emphasize her connectedness to the nation's children and her responsibility to protect their health and that of the vulnerable, enabling her to push through significant changes in the focus of US environmental policies. In her position as head of the EPA, Browner became an "othermother".

Protecting children from polluted air, water, and food

Browner helped to make great strides in establishing a consistent and nationwide policy for pediatric environmental health. She was the first in US environmental politics to account for children's unique vulnerability to environmental threats. In 1995 she announced an unprecedented drive by EPA to "consistently and explicitly evaluate environmental health risks of infants and children in all of the risk assessments, risk characterizations, and environmental and public health standards."[44] Soon after, she released a major EPA report detailing environmental threats to

children's health – from asthma-inducing air pollution, to pesticides in food or toxic chemicals that could increase the risk of childhood cancer. Her concerns are unsurprising when one looks at the focus of women's environmental activism throughout American history. In the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of the suburbs, home ownership, and consumerism, women became alarmed at the threats of air pollution caused by the increased use of personal cars as well as the emissions from expanding local industries, commercial factories, and housing construction. The suburbs, as Rome notes, were domestic spaces, and as women were traditionally the domestic caretakers, "threats to environmental quality in suburbia were threats to the women's sphere."[45] By handing out leaflets to mothers on her daily walks in New York, Hazel Henderson formed Citizens for Clean Air, gaining more than 20,000 members with around seventy-five percent women.[46] In 1954, when dense smog shut down schools and industries in Los Angeles, thousands took part in one of the first all-women pollution protests, calling themselves the "Smog-a-Tears" and emphasizing their maternal roles as "nature's housekeepers".[47]

The League of Women Voters was particularly active in the fight against water pollution, and many local chapters launched their own clean-water campaigns. By 1960 they played a vital role in the debate over federal responsibility for water quality. By utilizing municipal housekeeping strategies they were successful in lobbying government, raising public support for sewage treatment plants, and waging a "Citizens Crusade for Clean Water" without generating opposition and suspicion.[48] The use of pesticides and their contamination of water and food also encouraged women's environmental activism. They particularly helped to make Rachel Carson's 1962 publication, *Silent Spring,* a powerful political force. Carson, whose work brought widespread attention to the harmful effects of chemicals, recognized women's role in raising awareness to the issue: "Women have greater intuitive understanding of such things. They want for their children not only physical health but mental and spiritual health as well."[49]

Browner thus continued this trend of women's environmental activism, bringing the maternal rhetoric into many of EPA's new and existing policies on issues such as air pollution and water and food contamination. In her efforts to do so, she drew on new scientific research which was emerging in the early 1990s, such as the National Research Council's (NRC) study *Pesticides in the Diets of Infants and Children* and the EPA's report on *The Respiratory Health Effects of Passive Smoking.* These argued that the current environmental protection standards, based on the average adult male, were leaving children exposed to dangerous levels of toxic chemicals.[50] The studies highlighted children's increased susceptibility to environmental threats such as pesticides and pollution as a result of their undeveloped immunological, digestive, neurological, and organ systems. They showed that children's exposure to such hazards also differed from adults as a consequence of child-specific behaviors including crawling on the ground, object-to-mouth activities, frequently playing outside, as well as drinking more water, eating more food, and inhaling more air compared to body weight than adults. Such exposure to toxic chemicals could have adverse effects on children's development and health, being associated with chronic conditions such as diabetes, asthma, and autism.[51] Browner called for "an awareness of children's unique susceptibility" to toxic threats to "guide every action we take to protect public health and the environment" and she set out a new national agenda to protect children "more comprehensively than ever before."[52]

To carry this out, in 1997 Browner established a new EPA center on children, the Office of Children's Health Protection (OCHP). Reinforcing her aim to "forge a new generation of environmental protection" where "protecting the health of our children is one of this administration's highest priorities," the OCHP was to review and formalize EPA's children's environmental health protection policies as well as to expand outreach and research programs.[53] She sought to gain a five-fold increase in funding for children's issues over Fiscal Year 1996 in order to expand initiatives and research.[54] And in the same year, Clinton formalized Browner's efforts through Executive Order 13045, 'Protection of Children From Environmental Health Risks and Safety

Risks', requiring federal agencies to research, consider and prioritize protecting children's health and safety.[55]

One of Browner's major achievements was to adopt drastic new pollution controls, setting the toughest National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) in a generation for emissions of ozone (smog) and particulate matter (soot). This was the "the single largest reduction in toxic air pollution in the nation's history" and for the first time the effects on children's health were taken into consideration.[56] Scientific research increasingly associated childhood exposure to air pollution with reduced lung function and higher cases of bronchitis or asthma. More than twenty-five percent of the nation's children were living in areas that did not fulfil national air quality standards, making asthma the leading cause of children's hospitalization and school absences. Asthma-related deaths among children had also increased by 118 percent between 1980 and 1993.[57] Browner's tough pollution controls were thus part of her call for "action to protect millions of Americans, and especially millions of American children, from harmful air pollution".[58] In her 1997 oral testimony before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, she estimated that her measures would protect more than fifty million people from adverse health effects of smog, as well as lead to 250,000 fewer cases of asthma, and 60,000 fewer cases of bronchitis among children.[59] They would ensure that "children, simply by playing outdoors, are not doing irreversible damage to their health".[60]

Along with air pollution controls, Browner also aimed to protect America's children from contaminated food and water, pledging to strengthen pesticide and food safety laws and to ensure cost-effective pest management methods that could replace toxic pesticides. She secured the passage of the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA), signed by President Clinton in August 1996, which created "a single, more protective and comprehensive, health-based, child-driven standard for all pesticides."[61] This was the first time that children, rather than adult males, were taken as the benchmark in environmental safety laws. Due to their adverse effects on children's health, the FQPA

aimed to limit the risks of pesticide exposure and prohibit the production of the most hazardous older pesticides altogether.[62] Browner also worked to safeguard the nation's children from lead poisoning, which she labelled as "the single greatest environmental threat to children in America". Nearly one-million children had elevated levels of lead in their blood in 1999, a chemical which could interrupt red blood cell formation, reduce birth weight, delay physical and mental development and, at high levels, cause anemia or kidney damage.[63] Fighting, for example, "to make sure that our homes are places where children are nurtured, not poisoned," Browner worked to limit children's exposure to old lead-based paint, creating a new law requiring that landlords of buildings constructed before 1978 inform tenants and buyers of known lead contamination.[64] Her measures against lead resulted in a ninety-eight percent reduction in atmospheric lead levels and a seventy percent drop in blood levels of lead among children. They spared millions of children "the painful consequences of lead poisoning, such as permanent nerve damage, anemia or mental retardation."[65]

Ensuring the public's right-to-know

In 1993, EPA was still in the "embarrassing shadow" of the Reagan administration and largely clouded in public discontent. Browner worked to restore the nation's trust and confidence, creating an Agency responsive to and respected by the public.[66] In her efforts to do so, she sought to increase the public's "right-to-know" about environmental threats in their communities, a priority that became a fundamental cornerstone of the Agency. Here, again, Browner used the rhetoric of parenting, motherhood and caring to justify her expansion of the public's right-to-know:

> *No parent should have to tell a child on a warm summer day that the air is just too dirty to go outside. No parent should have to tell a child that the fish isn't safe to eat, or the water is too polluted for swimming. No parent should have to raise a child next to a toxic dump.*

> *We women have enough to worry about without having to wonder whether our families are safe when we work or play outdoors, or turn on the tap, or wade in a neighborhood stream.*[67]

Browner worked with First Lady Hilary R. Clinton on this issue, establishing a right-to-know initiative within EPA's national agenda for children's environmental health protection. Framed by Browner as a "major step forward in further protecting our children," the *Family Right-to-Know Initiative* gave families, for the first time, real-time information on environmental hazards such as smog levels or lead-based paint, helping them make informed choices concerning their children's exposure to such hazards.[68] It helped to provide better consumer information on the risks to children's health, as well as to educate parents, teachers, community leaders and local policy-makers so that they could take appropriate steps to identify and prevent such risks. Part of the initiative included the Ozone Mapping Project, launched by the First Lady on Ozone Awareness Day, 21 May 1998. This tracked smog with the aid of four hundred monitors in twenty-two eastern states and the District of Columbia and made the data available on the internet or through local weather broadcasts.[69]

The Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) and FQPA included other right-to-know initiatives. Embodying Browner's new philosophy of communication and openness, in 1998 EPA released a consumer-friendly brochure which was distributed to the public through large retail grocers, giving information on reducing exposure to pesticides in foods. EPA also required water utilities to send Consumer Confidence Reports – annual reports on local water quality, the contaminants it contained, and the health risk it posed – to more than 240 million Americans in their household water bills.[70] Browner significantly expanded the Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), almost doubling the amount of reportable chemicals on the list and increasing the number of industries required to report their toxic chemical releases by almost a third, to a total of over 31,000.[71] She believed that putting this data into "the hands of citizens" was one of the administration's best tools for fighting

harmful pollution.[72] Information, she argued, was one of the most effective non-regulatory, common sense ways to ensure protection of the American people from environmental hazards. "Informed and involved" communities were her "front-line allies," "vitally important to protect where we live and how we live."[73] Despite opposition from some in industry and Congress who believed that too much information was a bad thing because it confused and unduly alarmed US citizens, Browner stood firm in her position. She argued that given the facts, local citizens could make "intelligent, informed decisions" about protecting their health and communities – they would "always make far better decisions than some distant bureaucracy."[74] Her "new generation of environmental protection" was thus about arming the American people with "more information, the right tools, and greater flexibility" so that they could take action to protect themselves and their communities and reduce pollution in their own backyards.[75]

Campaigning for environmental justice

At EPA, Browner designated the issue of environmental justice as one of the Agency's highest priorities unlike any previous political leader. From its very beginnings in the 1970s, women, largely from minority and blue-collar communities, have led the environmental justice movement. Today they make up almost eighty percent of the executive directors of environmental justice groups and half of their leaders.[76] According to Robert Verchick, the environmental justice movement was, as much as it was an environmental and civil rights movement, a women's and a feminist movement, adopting many of the methods associated with the 1970s feminist movement, such as "unmasking patriarchy" to prompt creative ways of addressing environmental threats.[77] Yet, as most of the women activists would have rejected the feminist title, it is perhaps more accurate associate the environmental justice movement with maternalism. Most accounts show women activists as citing race and class as the leading factor in environmental justice issues, however the movement was also undeniably one with a maternalist outlook, focusing on family safety and social equality. Activism in the environmental justice movement was for many women and mothers – who

saw first-hand the effects of environmental toxins to health and quality of life – motivated by their maternal identities and desire to protect their children, families and communities from environmental ills.[78] As Joni Seager suggests, women are typically first to notice the imminent effects on family health and safety when "the water smells peculiar" and "when the laundry gets dingier with each wash," catalyzing a "powerful environmental challenge at the grassroots."[79]

Hazel Johnson, for example, an African American mother of seven from Altgeld Gardens in Chicago who became known as the "mother of the environmental justice movement," started her environmental activism as a result of her concern over the increased cancer deaths of children in her community. Linking the deaths to environmental causes, she founded the People for Community Recovery (PCR) in 1979, the first public housing environmental justice organization in America. Having uncovered that Altgeld Gardens had been built on top of landfills and illegal dumping grounds for toxic chemicals, Johnson's PCR demanded a permanent ban on waste facilities in the area and successfully won safer sewer and water lines.[80] Lois Gibbs and the women in the working-class community of Love Canal – where Hooker Chemical company had dumped tons of chemical waste before covering it over – also began their activism as concerned mothers, who noticed their children were suffering from exceedingly high rates of asthma. The women, most working full-time at home, saw the day-to-day environmental threats that their children, families and communities faced due to chemical exposure. Having organized the main protest body at the center of the struggle, the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA), Gibbs and Debbie Cerrillo led the women's activism for two years, eventually forcing President Jimmy Carter to issue a declaration of emergency relocating all families at Love Canal.[81] Across the country, women like Gibbs and Johnson, who were restricted from holding positions of formal political power but who sought to protect their disadvantaged children and communities, started protests and activism groups. As scholars including Verchick and Rich Newman have shown, these women saw their involvement in environmental justice campaigning as a natural extension of their roles as nurturers and primary caregivers. While rejecting the feminist title, they acknowledged women's essential characteristics

and experiences that made them suited to take leadership on this issue. They were "housewives-turned-activists," linking their motherhood to social justice and environmental protection.[82]

While environmental justice became a federal government concern just prior to Carol Browner assuming office, with the creation of the Office of Environmental Justice in 1992, she was one of the first to give this challenge institutional significance.[83] Placing great concern on providing environmental protection for low-income and minority communities, she continued the notion that environmental justice was largely a woman's and a mother's battle, even at the height of environmental politics. Her dedication to the cause revolved around her desire to protect America's children and families. She recognized that four million children, often those in minority and low-income families, were living close to toxic waste dumps, and that many children were falling prey to asthma or becoming unwell due to unclean water. "A mother," she argued, "should not have to worry about her child climbing over a fence into toxic waste that was dumped there 20 years ago."[84] She believed "every community should be able to look forward to a secure future for their children, not only those who could afford to live in the cleanest, safest communities."[85]

Browner labelled 1994 as an "unprecedented year for environmental justice action and awareness in the federal government."[86] In February of that year President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice. This was the first presidential effort directing federal environmental agencies to devote attention to public health and environmental issues among minority and low-income communities, and to provide those communities with access to information as well as opportunities to participate in environmental and public health decision-making.[87] As part of the Order, Browner established the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC), making environmental justice a guiding principle within EPA and ensuring a commitment to provide all people with "clean air, pure water, land that is safe to live on, food that is safe to eat, regardless of who they are, how much money they have, or where they live."[88] In 1995, she published the EPA National Environmental Justice Strategy, which involved plans to increase

research on environmental and human health risks for populations disproportionately exposed to such risks.

Her strategy sought to protect workers exposed to high-risk pesticides, for example, and families who fished in polluted waters. It would also increase funding for projects such as cleanup and reuse of America's toxic waste and Brownfields sites, many of which were in America's inner cities. "No child should have to grow up next to a toxic waste dump," Browner claimed.[89] She also devoted energy and resources to cleaning up more Superfund sites over her first four years in office than had been addressed in the previous twelve years combined. Other initiatives included increasing the Agency's education and outreach projects relating to environmental justice such as those to support historically Black Colleges and Universities in providing opportunities for staff and students to engage in community environmental programs; and the Pollution Prevention program, a grant scheme designed to support regional activities to prevent pollution in low income and minority communities.[90]

Conclusion

This article has examined Carol Browner's policy foci during her tenure as EPA Administrator, highlighting her concern for the environmental health of America's children. It has demonstrated the ways in which Browner's identity as a woman and mother shaped her priorities and policies, and how her maternal ideology molded the changing focus of US environmental policy. Browner had not, as she claimed herself in an interview with *EPA Insight*, necessarily been a victim of the "glass ceiling" that many women faced when attempting to reach positions of high status.[91] She managed instead to reach the height of executive leadership in national politics. Yet in office, she still conformed to traditional gender expectations, appealing to the non-threatening feminine role of mother and nurturer in order to exert authority over environmental politics.

Despite increasingly egalitarian ideals and participation in the labor force, women's expected responsibilities within the family and private sphere remained consistent. In expressing her

politics as a natural extension of her role as a mother and caregiver, couching her arguments in terms of their impact on future generations, Browner was able to claim credibility and to succeed as an expert in a field where women have rarely been allowed. Motherhood, which is believed to instill in women values such as altruism and protection, no doubt inspired her desire to protect the health and well-being of children and those most vulnerable from environmental hazards. It is not surprising that Browner approached environmental policies with a sensitivity to their impacts on the nation's children and advocated for policies that would more explicitly protect their health.

Unlike any of her male predecessors, she put children "at the focal point of EPA's mission".[92] At the end of her tenure, she thanked the President "as a mother and as a person whose job it is to protect the American people from environmental hazards" for all he had done to "ensure a safe, healthy environment for our children, our children's children, and all the generations to come."[93] Yet this detracts from her own role within the administration. It was in her agency and under her leadership that these children's health policies were developed and implemented. Without her own efforts as a mother and caregiver to elevate children's issues in public policy and to continue to push for children's environmental protection, it is doubtful that this would have emerged as such a high priority within Clinton's EPA. She was the driver behind the administration's "new generation of environmental protection," one that took "children's health protection into the twenty-first century."[94] Her experience as a mother and a primary caregiver undoubtedly ensured that she stood steadfast in her position to protect the nation's children. In 1997, the National Mother's Day Committee awarded her the Outstanding Mother of the Year Award. Two years later, she won the first ever Advocate for Children Award from the Ambulatory Pediatric Association for outstanding contributions towards protecting children's health.[95] As Browner asserted in 1997, "when it comes to protecting our kids, I will not be swayed."[96]

Scholars have explored the impact of women's maternalism on grassroots environmental activism in depth. While women's attitudes and perspectives are not solely defined by gender but

vary according to age, religion, race, class, societal and historical contexts, such research demonstrates the pervasiveness of the motherhood ideology as a political strategy since the nineteenth century. Throughout American history, motherhood has brought diverse groups of women together to pursue a common goal of protecting others from environmental threats. This article has expanded on this research, highlighting the existence and impact of maternalism at the apex of US environmental politics and decision-making. It has shown that by articulating a distinctive maternal analysis of environmental matters – one that emphasizes responsibility for family and children's health – women could have significant input in the shaping of US environmental policy. The maternal ideology has shaped not only gendered environmental concerns and activism, but also environmental politics. As Seager suggests, it has "changed the nature of environmental discourse by introducing new concerns and ways of expressing them".[97]

In bringing her maternal outlook into politics, Browner invoked the spirit of many earlier generations of women environmental activists. Her different personal experiences and knowledge from the men who preceded her affected the way that the environment was framed, understood, and protected. In her eight years at EPA, as one of the first women in the presidential Cabinet to have leadership over environmental matters, Browner managed to create a new generation of environmental protection that differed significantly from its previously masculine culture. For the first time in US history, she ensured environmental concerns for the most vulnerable Americans, including children and minority or low-income families, were being addressed specifically. She included children's health initiatives in many of EPA's policies to tackle air pollution and prevent childhood respiratory diseases, to improve water quality, and to reduce exposure to pesticides and toxins. She created a new era of communication between EPA and stakeholders, ensuring the public were fully informed of environmental threats faced by their children. And she ensured that caring for and protecting all communities no matter of race or class became a routine way of doing business in her Agency. Carol Browner expanded the scope of environmental politics in the US, to

enable the nation to "pass along a safe, clean, secure world to our children and our children's children."[98] She established a maternal brand of environmentalism.

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