1990 pamphlet “Children in our Lives: Another View of Lesbians Choosing Children” by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

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CHILDREN IN OUR LIVES:
Another View of LESBIANS CHOOSING CHILDREN

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Profile Productions
a word about PROFILE PRODUCTIONS

Profile Productions, dedicated to producing works about activist women writers, particularly of color, came into being in late 1986 when I decided to create a radio documentary to be aired in Boston over WGBH/FM. Although I had been producing programs for many years prior to this time, I wanted to create feminist programs that had a “timeless quality,” programs that would inspire, sustain and motivate us to create change now and for generations to come.

“A Radio Profile of Audre Lorde” was broadcast as an hour long special for Black History Month in February of 1987. Since that time, Profile Productions has issued two 2-set cassettes: Audre Lorde reading from both *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and *Sister Outsider*; and an hour long videocassette of the cultural events from the 1990 I AM YOUR SISTER Conference honoring Lorde. This pamphlet you are reading is the first printed material brought out by Profile.

I would like to offer thanks here to the women in community and public radio, cable tv, video production and graphic design who have consistently
provided me with their skills and access to their facilities.

Angela Bowen delivered this speech at the University of Massachusetts, Harbor Campus in 1988 to a wildly enthusiastic audience at the ‘Children in Our Lives’ conference. With the increase of children of lesbians in our community, the questions that she raised then are just as significant today, and still have had too little discussion.

In the several years that have passed since the conference, she has been asked by many of the women who attended that event to get it in print. She says she “always meant to.” Here it is, then, finally, and with pleasure from Profile Productions.

Jennifer Abod
May 1992

foreword

Because this speech was delivered to a predominantly lesbian audience, heterosexism and homophobia are presented as givens that do not need to be spelled out in fine detail. Lesbians know that our lives are proscribed by the majority culture. We are seen and treated as “less than.” Lesbians are discriminated against in jobs, housing, public accommodations, the courts, and the educational system. We are taunted, provoked, beaten and raped. Violent men have stated as they raped lesbians that they are doing it to “cure” them.

As a black woman, obviously my life is already proscribed in two ways. I am oppressed because I am black and because I am a woman. Black skin and womanness, however, being conditions we are born to, do not provoke the outrage that lesbianism does. Sexual repression, sexism and religious dogma all combine to make lesbians, as well as gay men and bisexuals, objects of scorn and fear from the majority of society. Lesbianism is seen as something people can choose or choose not to act on; since lesbianism can be hidden or ignored, it is not an oppression the heterosexual world generally considers legitimate.
In a society where one can lose her job, even her profession, by admitting to lesbianism; in a society where one’s affections and sexuality can be criminalized so that she can be barred legally from renting an apartment if the owner decides that her sexuality is a threat to the owner’s sensibilities; in a society where lesbians have their children taken away every day without so much as a blink of outrage from society at large, it is clear that lesbians who choose to have children need to sort out and deal with, not only the horrors of community homophobia, but also their own internal homophobia. It is also necessary for us to decide in advance how we intend to rear our children in the face of the callous injustices of the patriarchal and heterosexist government system, local and national, on a day to day basis. I write this foreword two days after Ross Perot, independent candidate for president, announced to interviewer Barbara Walters on the 20/20 television show that, should he win the presidency, he would not have homosexuals serving in his cabinet. He has no prejudice, he asserts, but it would be a “distraction” that the “American People” would not need as he, the president, was striving to solve all the problems of the nation. (It must go without saying, of course, that the nation’s homophobia is not one of the problems.)

Lesbians who have endured outrageous homophobia directed against themselves, including lesbians who generally consider themselves apolitical, have been coming together to learn from one another what they need to know in order not to be trapped by a system that considers lesbians unfit parents. Parenthood—love for our children, fear of losing them, or even losing visitation rights—peels off the layers and reveals depths within some lesbians that surprise even themselves. Parenthood has silenced many a formerly outspoken activist. The fear that a lesbian experiences for her own safety increases exponentially when she becomes a parent because of the hostility often directed against her children.

Nevertheless, we see incredible acts of bravery and resourcefulness from lesbians who have not confronted the system before, but are forced to do so as parents. They find the resources, allies and inner strength to stand up as lesbians and fight for the right to live their own lesbian lives while mothering their children.

Heterosexual women who struggle as single moth-
ers to pay the rent, put food on the table, find affordable child care, educate their children, and otherwise nurture and guide their children cannot imagine the courage it takes lesbians to lead their lives and raise children while battling for lesbian civil rights at the same time. With every passing year, fewer lesbians are willing to fight this battle wearing the heavy disguise of heterosexuality. We have decided that the added weight dragging on the spirit is not worth it.

Still, lesbians today are far better off than we were only a few short years ago. The women's movement has brought us out of isolation and created bonds among lesbians and between lesbians and progressive heterosexual feminist. The new reproductive technologies have created the ability to have a child without the interference of vicious ex-husbands, hysterical relatives from either side, or the homophobic patriarchal bureaucracy of government officialdom judging one an unfit mother because she loves another woman. As it becomes easier for lesbians to decide whether they want to be parents, and as more lesbians make that choice, it becomes ever more imperative that we ask the questions that our grandmothers, our mothers, our aunts didn't think they had the right to ask; and that too many of our heterosexual sisters and friends still don't ask (although many more are doing so).

Lesbians have more freedom to ask the questions; there is no man in our life to insist that we carry on his seed, his name, his immortality. Since we have the freedom, we have the responsibility to take seriously the questions women have raised about motherhood, and to use our lesbian perspective to raise even more questions. The following article is one more piece adding to the larger discussion.

Four years have passed since this speech was delivered. Obviously, as time passes, things change. Where further clarification is provided that was not in the original speech, italics are used. Where emphasis is added (and where italics would normally be used), I have used bold Italic. An edited version of this speech was published in the anthology, Lesbians at Midlife (Spinsters Ink) in 1990. At the time of that publication, it was expected that Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press would be publishing the speech as pamphlet #7 of the Freedom Organizing Series, as was stated in the anthology. That did not occur. This pamphlet you are now reading by Profile Productions is the only separate publication of Children in Our Lives: Another View of Lesbians Choosing Children.

Angela Bowen
June, 1992
Brookline, Massachusetts
In 1976, Adrienne Rich said,

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world, women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children, if and as we choose, but the visions and the thinking necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe. Sexuality, politics, intelligence, power, motherhood, work, community and intimacy will develop new meanings; thinking itself will be transformed. This is where we have to begin. ¹

Well, lesbians, we have begun. At least, the bringing forth of children as we choose has begun. It's the visions and thinking, the politics, the community—all that other business—that I'm here to discuss.
A couple of months ago when I was first asked to speak at this conference, I was rather puzzled as to why, and I didn’t really think I was the person to do it because for the past year or two my own thoughts have been headed toward doing research on lesbian communities I could plug into with an eye toward retirement ten years down the road. It’s true that I have a 14 year old daughter I’m still mothering, but I saw myself as heading out of motherhood, basically counting the few years left until I was done with it all. But I did promise Joyce Kaufman, one of the event’s organizers, that I’d think about it. And then, in the spirit of sharing whatever I can from whatever experience I’ve had, I agreed to this talk, which of course called forth many feelings I’ve buried over the years. I’ve been mothering, but just doing it as I went along.

I guess part of the reason too that I’m standing up here trying in my own small way to talk about motherhood is because I remember how resentful I felt when the true deal about marriage hit me, and I realized that all the people who had been urging me along that path knew the truth about it but no one had told me! I’d asked all the women I could talk to what marriage was really like. And everyone, including those who professed to care about me, were under the societal pressure that they must uphold the myth so they wouldn’t disillusion young women. Didn’t want people to accuse them of being bitter, you know. Then when I made the discovery that I’d been rooked, and wanted to know was this all, what I heard was “Oh, girl, of course that’s what marriage is, you should know that, what did you expect? Don’t be so naive.” Accompanied by all those sly winks, the wise nods and the beginnings of the talk about men as those little boys whom you coddle and make think that they’re big strong, etc. Now that you’ve made the discovery, of course, you’re a member of the big girls’ club and you’re expected to help hoodwink all the rest of the young unmarried women until everyone’s initiated into the club. Well, I made up my mind that if anyone asked me, I’d sure as hell tell them all of it, including the few good things that I could somehow scrounge up for them. The truth as I saw it.
So, lately, doing some serious thinking about all this mothering, trying to get at my truths for you, what struck me was that motherhood has been such a constant factor in my life for the past 25 years that I never even considered that I’m not heading out of motherhood, even though my children will be grown. It will be with me for as long as I live. It’s a forever fact that never ceases to be. My first born died, one month short of his 4th birthday in 1966. And I remember the first mother’s day after he died wondering if I was a mother. Well, as it happened, at the time I had a foster daughter and a stepdaughter. So clearly I was a mother, even though my muddled grief didn’t allow me to think so. But I believe now that even if I didn’t have those older girls to mother, I still would have been a mother, because you don’t cease being a mother even though you outlive your child. You’re never again not a mother. Just as you’re never again a virgin once you have sex. Just as you’re never again not conscious once you become a feminist. So, you are never again not a mother once you have a child. It’s the only really forever relationship. Even if you decide to no longer mother some-

one you’ve mothered in the past, it’s still an ongoing relationship, if only one of refusal. You’re only done with it when you die. Now just think about that. I just realized that two weeks ago.

One week ago today, I was in Washington, D.C. at a Lesbian conference on aging called Passages. and the panel was asked “What was it like being a Lesbian of your age (which is 52)?” and we were told to define our answers in terms of being an activist, a feminist, disabled, whatever—and I chose to speak in terms of feminism, because it so totally transformed my life. Three times in my life I’ve felt transformed. Once when as a teenager I discovered dance, again when I was in my late thirties and discovered feminism, and then when at 40 I became a lesbian. Now, I’ve heard women say that being a mother transformed their lives, but I can’t say the same. I was a mother at 26, long before I felt the consciousness of feminism. But I felt reborn because of my feminism, and it is that feminism which allowed me to even begin to question the why’s of motherhood.
In my youth, women didn’t much question the desire to be mothers, even when they didn’t want husbands. I remember as a little girl saying, “I want to have children but I don’t want a husband.” And people would kind of think that was cute and laugh and I didn’t know why they were laughing. Then when I was a teenager, they would try to make me explain how I would go about this. I’d say, “Well, when I’m about 28, (to me that was pretty old) and I finish traveling all over the world dancing (which I did manage to do); I’ll pick out a healthy, intelligent man, have two children by him, he’ll go his way, and I’ll take the children and go my way.” And they would say, “Oh yeah, you think you’re going to pull that one off?” And others would simply stare at me in open-mouthed shock. But if I were a young woman today, that wouldn’t be a far-fetched plan. They’re doing it all the time. Lesbians and nonlesbians. We’re all doing it. We keep reading in the papers about broken, single-parent families. But what the statistics don’t tell is that those families aren’t necessarily broken. A great many are quite deliberately planned that way.

But why do we plot and plan to have these children? What do they offer? What does motherhood offer to lesbians? Is it really worth it? Why do we do it? Is it maternal instinct? But what is maternal instinct, really? Is it a response to societal conditioning? Are we exhibiting a rebellious defiance showing that, as lesbians we can have children without your participation or approval, you men, so up yours!? Is it the ego of perpetuating ourselves? Is it simple curiosity? Or the yearning to have the experience that every woman feels she has a right to? But if so, where did that yearning come from? Is it instinctual? And if it’s instinctual, why doesn’t every woman have it? And if these aren’t enough questions for you, what are yours?

There are probably just as many questions as there are lesbians sitting here. But we do ask questions, that’s the thing about us. And after all the questions, as lesbians, we still have to go out of our way to acquire children. But today’s technology assures that we don’t have to go as far out of our way as we used to. These days, we can make the choice to have
babies if we want. Was it only a decade ago that we were reading The Wanderground and dreaming of a lesbian utopia in which women would reproduce without benefit of men? What a fantasy!

Lesbian babymaking is now fashionable—and almost commonplace. In the excellent new anthology on lesbian parenting, Politics of the Heart, Jan Clausen writes,

We don’t move by rules, we move toward what we love. We don’t have or not have them for political reasons. Having kids, being with kids, looking toward a new generation is part of being human. And in one sense I think the current public and publicized interest in having babies is another way the lesbian feminist community has of stretching into a new-found sense of its rights to the full range of human and female experience.

Now, what about that full range of human and female experience? Well, being pregnant is a unique experience, and, after 3 births, I can tell you that in each of my completed pregnancies the first trimester, the last trimester, the birth and the postpartum experience didn’t exactly thrill me.

There is something to be said for the second trimester, though. You know, there’s that private little feeling between you and one other being that no one else can feel. The movement of the baby inside is quite sensuous, once you get used to it. Now, I may be strange, but out of this whole sacred, mystical feeling that I’ve seen written about in such glowing terms for so many years, that’s about what I’ve got to say. Let’s hear it for the second trimester.

Now, let’s see, what other rights do we have to the full range of human and female experience? Adrienne Rich, speaking of her own experience, states,

Soon I would begin to feel the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, Am I doing what is
right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much? The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children.

Along with what Adrienne Rich calls maternal guilt, we have what I call mothers' anxiety syndrome. That is, once we have children, we live for the entire duration of our lives with a little ball of anxiety in the pit of our stomach. Sure, we can surround it with the good feelings of being with children, helping them grow, feeling their sense of total acceptance of us—until they reach the teens, of course—but deep down, we never feel totally free again; we are forever waiting for that other shoe to drop. After the obvious anxiety of the pregnancy, waiting to see if what came out of you is a complete, viable, healthy person, then begin the years of seeing that they eat enough, burp enough, poop enough, sleep enough, air enough, bathe enough, exercise enough, walk, talk, smile, play, recognize, stimulate, or separate from you enough. You've got to see that they develop playmates, have manual dexterity, don't kill that playmate, are polite enough, get inoculated, know their numbers, colors, abc's, read, dress themselves, pick up their toys, don't run into the street, don't eat sand—or doo-doo. Later it's listen to the right music, go to a decent school, impress the teachers, get good marks. Then when they get older, it's school, it's studying, it's marks, it's cultural development, it's the right companions, it's dating, it's talking about relationships, drink, dope, sex, condoms, aids, college, marriage, grandchildren, etc, etc, etc. And all the while you're trying to have a life, and trying to affect the future of this world to assure that life goes on for yourself and for them and theirs. And all the while you live with that constant, lurking anxiety about your children that you who are not parents can't even conceive of.

Now, here's another in that range of human and female experience. Most of us who have borne children would never consider giving them away, even though in some cases we know someone else who would do a better job than we could. And of course we love them, so
that counts for everything. Well, sometimes we do, and sometimes we don’t. Now, I don’t mean this in the trivial sense of exasperation that overcomes us periodically when we say, “Sometimes I really hate that kid.” I mean that sometimes parents have children that they really don’t, simply can’t love. But who admits it? Just last week a woman spoke a cliche to me that I’ve heard over and over. She said of her 17 year old son “I love him, but I just don’t like him very much.” I smiled. What could I say? I’ve used the same words myself. But lately I’ve been wondering what do they mean?

You know, the myth abounds that we love our children. Well, we are bound to them, we’re responsible to and for them, but it’s not always possible to feel that automatic love for a child that we are assured comes naturally to every mother. We’re all born with inherent differences; our personalities don’t necessarily mesh, no matter how hard we try. You may happen to get a kid you just don’t like or love, and who doesn’t love you. And don’t be so sure it’s that unusual, either. This may just be one of the best-kept dirty little secrets the world over. As Marilyn Murphy writes in Politics of the Heart.

as a love relationship, motherhood bears some resemblance to that of an arranged marriage, wherein a woman chooses, or is forced, to enter a relationship with a person she does not know, but whom she is expected to love and take care of until one of them dies. Noeone, not even a mother, can promise to feel love always. We can feel and act upon what seem to be unbreakable ties of loyalty and duty to the members of one’s blood family, including one’s mother or one’s child, but that does not mean that we love them. Some of us can even admit to no longer loving a sibling or a parent. Mothers, however, are not likely to confess a lack of love for their child because to not love or to no longer love one’s child is supposed
to be the ultimate mother sin, worse than any kind of child abuse done in the name of love, and every mother knows this."

So if you seek motherhood to experience the full range of human and female experience posed by Jan Clausen, you’d be only fair to yourself if you included the realities I’ve just mentioned. We, of all people, don’t need to romanticize motherhood.

Motherhood was named an institution and examined by Adrienne Rich in her comprehensive Of Woman Born, published in 1976, for which she won a National Book Award. She writes, “Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong.” Yes, as Rich states, motherhood is an institution, but, as the old joke goes, who wants to live in an institution? It is at one and the same time the most revered and the most reviled of institutions. Lesbians notoriously have refused to live in institutions, that’s why we’re out here being our sweet lesbian selves. Yet, many lesbians who have read Rich’s classic work, along with other 70’s books such as The Baby Trap, have analyzed and agonized, and still found themselves craving the experience of motherhood. So they’ve plunged right in, many others follow, and the phenomenon grows.

Still, if we’re going to do motherhood, it’s good to be able to talk about how in our own honest lesbian ways. What about the how of being a mother? Can we change the set-up? Well, if any group of people can, we can. Lesbians take nothing for granted. We don’t subscribe to the mythology that lesbians can’t be mothers. So we go ahead and find out how to do it. We get the fly out of the ointment—that’s the men—and we plunge ahead getting our bodies ready, obtaining the sperm, shooting it in, waiting, becoming part of that great sisterhood of biological, rather than adoptive, or foster, mothers. We take our childbirth classes, hire our midwives, heave and push with the rest of them, and out come our little natural wonders, the chosen ones, and we’re off and running into motherhood.
Okay, the process of getting them here was certainly different from your old-time sisters. So now what? Can we make anything different out of the mothering process? It's quite clear that you newer mothers will have far more support for your choices than we old-timers had. You have the groups you've formed while talking about choosing children. Lesbian choice groups lead to lesbian birthing classes, lead to lesbian's children's playgroups, and on to lesbian mother and children communities. But who is part of those communities? How do you form your households? Clearly, some of those questions are being dealt with at this conference today and all over the lesbian feminist communities here and abroad.

So what model of childraising will you initiate or imitate? Nuclear, extended, interfamilial, mothers, partners, other mothers, childfree friends? The possibilities are bounded only by our imaginations.

A couple of weeks ago on NPR I heard about a group of German feminist mothers who presented a demand to the government for a full salary for staying home with their own children; a second group of feminists then condemned their action, saying that this would simply perpetuate the notion that women should be the primary caretakers of children, just when women should be breaking the barrier on that kind of thinking and getting out into the workforce. The men, said this second group, should be joining in and doing their share of childcare. Besides, how would the economy take the burden when working women were asking for more compensation to bring them to parity with men.

Listening to that report, I was thinking what a limited view the second group had. The more radical group to me was the group who wanted a full paycheck for raising the nation's children. They now receive about $275 per month compensation, but the women, knowing the government needs more children—this is West Germany, remember—felt that this was the time to push for full paychecks, the same pay they would make if they were out
in the workforce. Now, that’s some choice, I thought, if you can be paid a full salary for caring for your own child. But they’d need to figure out ways not to be separate servants to their individual households, even if they were getting paid for it.

Then, thinking about radical new ways to raise children, I remembered a little group I knew in Connecticut during the 70’s, consisting of one man and three wives, each woman maintaining her own household. The man went from one house to another. The first wife had two teenagers; the second had one little girl, about six when I first knew them, from a previous marriage. The third was a young woman in her last year of college when I met them, who flirted around the outskirts of the family for a couple of years, then joined them in a special ceremony. They attended all public events together dressed in African clothing and appeared to get along well, for the most part, especially the first and second wife and children, who shared childcare and much interaction. The community was somewhat appalled. I didn’t say it to anyone, but to me it was a great idea, except that they should have gotten rid of the guy and moved their families together. He was a pretty obnoxious fellow anyway, but he had really good taste. All the women were fine and smart and willing to defy convention. So if all those fine women put themselves, their children and each other first, they could have pooled their energy, resources, childrearing and other skills for one another’s benefit, not his. But since these were heterosexual women, unfortunately it didn’t occur to them.

But we’re lesbians, so, of course, we can break the mind boundaries set up around childrearing, right? Do you expect that you’ll bring together groups of mothers and children who’ll live in the same neighborhood, houses, apartment buildings, apartments? Will you share parenting with other mothers and some child-oriented single women? Will only your lovers have access to your children? Will you create networks of diversity for them? People with different ethnic and class backgrounds who are trying to overcome the variety of internalized “isms” we’re all infected
with? Children raised this way would be choice children indeed.

But, you know. I have to say that there's something about the notion of choice children that's a bit offputting to me, for many reasons. Does the title "Lesbians Choosing Children" mean that other women did not choose to have them? Does it mean that by definition the children of the new lesbians are somehow better than the children who came here in the time before all these new choices were available? Is it like a first choice in a contest, or... what is it? The word can call up all kinds of feelings for women who were never chosen: by the team, by girlfriends, by a favorite teacher, by a parent, etc. As a black woman, I feel a gut rejection of the notion of choice children, given our position in this society's pecking order. And here's another question I have, as a Black woman who had children the old fashioned way. For those of you who took up the banner of true feminism, how will the baby-making and child-rearing choices you are making now affect the work you've already put into coalition building, into self-examination, into throwing off the shackles of your own racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, ageism?

You see, when white women begin speaking of choice children, and begin turning inward to watch out for their own, red flags go up for me, and I'll tell you why. Along with the homophobia we all know exists against lesbian parents, there are some very real and particular dangers in raising black children in a racist society. Danger, I say. Danger to their tender and fragile self-esteem, beginning from the moment they realize that this society was not made for them, that they can be viewed with contempt simply for being. Danger of their joy in learning being snuffed out by racist teachers and administrators. Danger from an inherently racist and indifferent school system which consistently puts black children's educational well being and economic future at risk. Danger to their health and sanity that lurks on every street corner, in school yards, in hallways of apartment buildings where they live—beckoning, urging drugs, money, acceptance, escape from the hatred they see aimed at
them 24 hours a day.

If somehow you manage to shepherd them through all of this, if your girl draws closer to you and outwits the seducers, the rapists, the violence of sexual abuse; if she waits craftily for adulthood, soaking up everything you can teach her so that she will be armed to face it all; if somehow you and your very black boy child can bury the hurt you both feel at the withdrawal, the bare politeness, the veiled fear with which he is regarded by your white lesbian feminist “comrades in the struggle” as he grows relentlessly taller and more manly, thus more threatening because he is black as well as male, don’t even begin to think you’re home free. Still waiting is the danger that can end your son’s life in a snap decision by a racist cop armed with a gun who can shoot your black son dead because he was walking innocently down the street, or running with the exuberance of youth, and forgot for one instant that he cannot be a young, free-spirited boy in this hate-filled, racist world.

These are not just problems for me as a black

lesbian mother, nor only for mothers of color. These are your problems too. Do you believe this? Do you believe that the ultimate question for lesbians must be, what do you do with the children you bring here in defiance of the patriarchy, which says, “You don’t deserve to have children, since you’ve chosen this lifestyle.”? What will you teach them? Whose allies will you raise them to become? To whom will you be trying to prove yourselves worthy? Your families, neighbors, teachers, social workers, employers, the corner grocer, the postman? And whom will you sacrifice to prove yourselves worthy? Me, my children, your integrity, feminism, your own soul? In Politics of the Heart, Nancy Polikoff states.

Childrearing probably should not become the total focus of one’s political energy anymore than other important, intimate endeavors, such as coming out to parents and working on homophobia. There is a lot of work to do, and all of us who don’t do it must ask ourselves why, must try to understand the nature of these times, and
must struggle to find a way for more people to resume the larger fights. Mothers cannot let themselves off the hook. 6

Actually, to my mind, motherhood gives us more, not less, reason for being on the hook. Yes, we have some ethical and political choices ahead as more children of lesbians enter our community of women.

Were you around during the past 10 to 20 years, making women who had children the old-fashioned way feel as if we should hide our children away, never mention them, and leave them at home while we attended women-only events? I somehow don’t expect that that will happen in this new environment of lesbian choice. Were you among the brave new women who set up those cruel “only girl children acceptable” parameters, making us choose between leaving our boys at home (if we could find sitters), or staying at home with them, rather than joining our sisters in shaping our movement? I hope we’ve come too far for that, even if so many lesbians today weren’t choosing to have children. Did you ever support a sister with children by offering to babysit, by including her children in invitations, or even by simply inquiring after them, giving her an opportunity to acknowledge that they just might be as important to her as the demonstration, the mailing, the rap session? It’s not too late. And for those of you just beginning to raise children, do women of color, poor women, disabled women now have the support of you and your children in our struggles. Or do you have more important concerns now that you have your child’s welfare at stake?

In Politics of the Heart, a woman is asked how having a child affected her being out as a lesbian and her reply was,

If anything, I went back into the closet a little more. Before, I didn’t compromise my freedom to be gay and I was really willing to teach other people about gay rights. Then after Megan came, it wasn’t just me at stake. I had to think about if I was going to bring down any un-
necessary publicity on her, any kind of hardship. It made me be more careful. I didn’t really go back in the closet, but I’m more careful, and I’m not willing to get in trouble or put myself under the public eye or take on conflict that might make her life harder. There is something I love more than my own freedom, and that’s her.

The same woman also said, “I feel like I finally belong absolutely to the biggest club on earth. There’s a sense of belonging to motherhood that I never thought I’d have. All of a sudden I’m good friends with my sister who’s had children for years.” Now it’s pretty seductive to finally be a member of the absolutely biggest club on earth. But what do you do with that feeling? Pat Parker, writing in the same book, says,

We have had to do some serious consciousness raising among family and friends. We simply made it clear that anyone wishing to participate in this child’s life had to accept the premise that she had two mothers...the school got it that she would be picked up by whichever of us was available, that the permission slip was signed by whoever remembered to do it, that potluck food was prepared by whoever had time. I still had to go to the school after her first mother’s day there and make it clear that she came home with two mother’s day gifts or none at all.

What will you teach your children, I ask you. To align themselves with heterosexuals, becoming yet another source of oppression against us? Or will you teach them to assume that our fight is also their fight? Will you be trying to raise people who can be your own friend and ally later in life, radical little warriors in the battle? Or will you bring up yet another bunch of greedy yuppies, mixed and matched and blended in with all the other little heterosexuals so that they won’t have to suffer any slight discomfort by being considered different?
Do my children, my grandchildren have future allies in your children? Or when they've all grown up, will my black children need to start from scratch to teach your children and grandchildren the ground rules about racism, ableism, classism because you have been so busy blending and hiding for the sake of your choice children that my children can't even find allies anymore? Will those of you who can pass, who can mix and match, make a commitment that whatever awareness of other people's oppression you have gained in our struggles together, you will impart that consciousness to your children, bringing them along with you as your own consciousness grows? Or, now that you have your baby, has it become too difficult to keep fighting the good fight? It is easier to pass, we all know that. But there are some choices to be made here.

You know, among the women who joined the second wave of feminism, beginning in the late 60's, there was a commitment to address racism and classism as well as sexism. That commitment drew many women of color into feminism. Now, once consciousness dawns, you don't choose or not choose to be a feminist; there is no choice about it. Still, it was difficult for many of us who were born into communities of color because it meant rebellion against our root communities, which insisted that feminists were white, middle class women looking to advance themselves into the existing structures of a racist and classist society. That argument still abounds today, although it recedes gradually, very gradually, as the skeptical communities of color see where principled feminists come down on most of the issues. But the struggle, begun two decades ago, to hammer out our difficulties so that we can identify and acknowledge our differences, assuage the hurts, hear one another's oppressions and work together to confront our common enemies, is only just begun, really. We can't expect in these very few short years to overcome hundreds of years of separation, divide and conquer tactics by intransigent men and unenlightened women, as well as our own internalized terror and self protection. So, for those of us out who've already stuck our faces out the door, rather than retreating into the closet to protect our children, we need
to work to develop surroundings conducive to cushioning our children from the hostility of heterosexism by finding competent, loving allies among lesbians, gay men and progressive heterosexuals who will know and honor who we are. By hiding, we are not helping our children. And putting our lesbianism on hold until they're grown is no solution. We can come up with more creative solutions to mothering than retreating into a closet.

Just recently, I figured out one way to provide more support for my daughter, my life partner and myself. Tomorrow, four loving women, one who has a child and three who do not, will participate with us in a bonding ceremony between them and my daughter. These are women we've come to know and respect who have talents, love and warmth to share with her; and she's an absolute gem and can give something back to each of them in turn. No one person can or should try to be the be-all to another. We have so many resources in the community that mothers don't need to end up feeling the full burden of trying to do it all themselves. In fact, the more of us who share our children within the community, the better for all of us. Single women with much to give and receive, and the children as well. As Sweet Honey in the Rock tells us, "Your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of life yearning for itself."

My mother, an immigrant from the West Indies, was aware of her need for assistance when my father died in 1938, leaving her a widow with 7 children. She sought out allies. We each had at least 2 godparents, some of us three. But as we grew up and began to identify the grownups we might bond with more naturally, she allowed each of us that connection after carefully checking out the people we had chosen. If she didn't like them, she let us know, but that didn't happen often. We had pretty good judgment. So each of us had special adults, and we're all the richer for it. Surround your children with the kind of people whose influence on them will please you. Furthermore, when we place our children in the hands of professionals, multicultural, nonexist day care centers and caregivers
ought to be the least of what we demand. And the more we insist that they exist, the more they will exist. Even if there's a daycare center on your own corner and it's not in line with your life choices, forget it. We've got to remember that when the children are very young, interaction with neighbors, playmates, and parents of the playmates can have tremendous—sometimes disastrous—influence.

I'd like now to get back to those lesbians who hide once they are parents. It's hard to answer people who think their children are such delicate flowers that they can't undergo the trauma of having to face the reality of their parents being different from other parents. My daughter's fine about most of it, except that she can't stand for me to be on t.v. talking about being a lesbian. I tell her that I understand how she feels, but she needs to think about the children in South Africa or in the Palestinian camps in Israel if she thinks she's suffering because she sees my face on t.v. That tends to put things in perspective a bit. And, although she may not like it, she does respect that this is my life, and she'll have to

choose later how to live her own.

Children are strong, resilient and brave when they're given reason to be. They also get grown and gone eventually, and you're left with yourself to live with always. And they're left with the lifelong remembrances of you and what you told and showed them about how to live. Giving up your principles in the name of motherhood can be a pretty self-defeating choice. For one thing, you don't like yourself as much as you used to. The children have made you a bit less of a proud dyke than you used to be before you had them to worry about, so they become a source of resentment. And then, by hiding, you're telling them that if the larger society tells them to shut their mouths about anything that doesn't sit well with the power boys, you think they should go along with that. And also, let's not forget that kids watch and absorb our brand of integrity even if it doesn't seem to sink in at the time. I've heard my 19 year old son saying something about me with pride to other people that I never hear him address directly to me. And I can't count the number of times children, not
just mine but others, have come back and told me that they appreciated my having stood firm in some piece of conflict we’d had where they had yelled, screamed and cried because they were being made to take a difficult path. But, quiet as it’s kept, they also remember the times you took the other, not so noble, path. Those aren’t the times they tell you about, but they sure remember them. Well, you watched your parents, and you sure as hell remember what they did, don’t you? I know I do.

Still, when all is said and done, there are no guarantees. You can spend all those good years you’ve got, and still not end up in concert with your own children. They might decide to become the epitome of everything you can’t stand. Look what happened to Lacey’s son on “Cagney and Lacey.” He joined the marines! And you know that’s not just t.v. fodder. I’ve seen worse. And you probably have too. Hell, look at us, aren’t we the ultimate rebellion?

I’m going to close by answering the question so many of us mothers hedge about when we’re asked. We don’t feel we can answer, for whatever reasons. It goes, “If you had it to do again, would you have children, knowing what you know now?” My answer is no. Right now, I feel the weight of all the years of mothering that I’ll never shake off. The trips I haven’t taken, the books I haven’t read, the solitude I haven’t enjoyed, the books I haven’t written, the women I haven’t loved. Maybe if you asked me again in ten years, I’d feel differently, but somehow I doubt it. If I had it to do all over again, I’d mother children, as I’ve done; but I wouldn’t have them myself. I’d take some off their mothers’ hands for a couple of months at a time, or even a few years. One of my most positive mothering experiences, in addition to my birth daughter, was with my teenage foster daughter for three and a half years. That was over twenty years ago, and between then and now, many children have thought of me as their mother, whether I wanted them to or not.

I came here to share, and I hope you understand the spirit in which I do that. I’m only one voice among many, speaking my own truth to the best of my ability. And the most
helpful thing I can say is, if you have children, for your own sake and for theirs, don't horde them to yourselves. Share them. And for those of you who choose not to have children, share in the nurturing of some other women's children. Our children of course are our future. But everyone else's children are our future too. So whatever else we decide, let's share the children in whatever ways we can: physically, spiritually, financially, mentally; let's take care of one another's children, as well as one another. Because we've got a long way to go, and we'll only make it by expanding our consciousness enough to create better ways of doing it together.

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dedication

For all the lesbian mothers who have always struggled to raise the children—when there was a movement and when there was not; with the help of the movement and/or in spite of it.

And for all the lesbians who have helped to mother children they did not birth themselves, but who let that make no difference; who have always understood that all children need to be loved and nurtured, and who were willing to do their part.
about the author

Angela Bowen, black lesbian feminist activist writer and mother has been speaking and writing in the women's and the lesbian and gay communities since 1983. She often speaks at college campuses about diversity in all its manifestations. In 1989 she received the Fannie Lou Hamer Award for her work on behalf of women.

In her earlier life she was a dancer, and ran a cultural center where she was teacher, choreographer and mentor for many years to countless inner city young women and men.

She has been a mother for 30 years, having raised several children, including a foster daughter and a stepdaughter, and assisted in raising a grand-daughter.
thanks for the help and encouragement
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the committee of the Lesbians Choosing Children network who, by inviting me to speak, forced me to examine my own conflicting feelings about motherhood.

endnotes


7. ibid, 119.

8. ibid, 118.

9. ibid, 97, 99.
Lesbians have more freedom to ask the questions; there is no man in our life to insist that we carry on his seed, his name, his immortality. Since we have the freedom, we have the responsibility to take seriously the questions women have raised about motherhood, and to use our lesbian perspective to raise even more questions.

Angela Bowen