

*'Maternal Thinking' as Intellectual Gold for International Relations: A Panel in Honor of Sarah Ruddick (1935-2011)*

**Panel Abstract:**

In honoring Sara Ruddick with a Distinguished Woman Philosopher Award from the Society of Women in Philosophy, Hilde Lindemann Nelson so described Ruddick's contribution to philosophy: "Like a medieval sage in possession of the philosopher's stone, Sally has taken the dishonored dross of the work of mothering and turned it into intellectual gold" (2003). Ruddick's influential body of work -- and especially her seminal *Maternal Thinking* (1989,1995) revolutionized the way philosophy talked about the work of mothering, by describing it as a set of practices involving a specific kind of situated thought that arises out of actual child-caring practices, but which represents one contribution to an ongoing feminist project. This panel uses the philosophical and analytical richness of Ruddick's work to advance knowledge in feminist IR. The following papers have in common a recuperation of the epistemic value of 'maternal thinking' for international politics. Two of the papers engage Ruddick's work theoretically, by developing possibilities for feminist just war and peace theories; three papers use maternal thinking as theoretical lens to look at specific and varied practices in international politics: the war on terror, maternal and child health policies and 'fiber arts' as women's resistance.

*Sections:*

Feminist Theory and Gender Studies  
International Ethics

*Chair:* Jacqui True, University of Auckland (NZ) - [j.true@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.true@auckland.ac.nz)

*Discussant:* Joan Tronto, University of Minnesota (USA) – [jctronto@umn.edu](mailto:jctronto@umn.edu)

Carol Cohn, Consortium for Gender, Security and Human Rights (USA) - [ccmcohn@aol.com](mailto:ccmcohn@aol.com)

**"Vulnerability" in National Security and Humanitarian Policy and Practice**

This paper takes as its starting point Ruddick's discussion of "vulnerability" in *Maternal Thinking*. It examines the kind of thinking about vulnerability that Ruddick describes as developed through maternal practice, and contrasts it with the conceptions of and responses to vulnerability that permeate national security and humanitarian discourses. It explores the specific forms of practice and reason that are implicated by these different stances toward vulnerability, and shows that the (often unexamined) assumptions underlying these stances are profoundly consequential for both policy and practice. Specifically, it takes both nuclear weapons and the so-called "War on Terror" as particular forms of response to perceived vulnerability, and scrutinizes the practices associated with each in light of the forms of rationality arising from maternal practice. It also explores the assumptions underlying the concept of "vulnerable groups" commonly employed in international policy institutions, teasing out their implications for politics, policy and action.

Elizabeth Frazer, University of Oxford (UK) - elizabeth.frazer@politics.ox.ac.uk  
Kimberly Hutchings, London School of Economics (UK) - K.Hutchings@lse.ac.uk

### **Revisiting Ruddick: Feminism, Non-Violence and Pacifism**

“I am obsessed with deliberate, organized legitimate violence. I am determined to tell one story of maternal thinking that is ready to be turned into a story of peace.” (Ruddick, 1992)  
For Ruddick, mothering and feminism are not immune to the attractions of militarist thinking, but they are also practices characterised by virtues of attentiveness and care that work against the combination of hierarchy and selflessness that maintains the war system. In Ruddick’s reflections on her argument in *Maternal Thinking* (1989), what emerges most strongly is her *need* to find resources for the resistance of militarism. Yet in spite of the strength of her resistance to war and her commitment to non-violent politics, she refuses to identify her feminist maternal thinking with pacifism. The aim of this paper is to explore the reasons why, for Ruddick, non-violence is not equivalent to pacifism. In doing so we seek to contribute to ongoing debates about the possibility of feminist just war, and about the relationship of non-violence to violence in feminist thought.

Fiona Robinson, Carleton University (Canada) - fiona\_robinson@carleton.ca

### **Discourses of Motherhood and the Ethics of Care: Why Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* Matters in International Politics**

While ‘mothering’ is widely seen to be irrelevant to international politics, discourses of ‘motherhood’ are often prevalent in global policy debates. This paper will examine the discourses of motherhood as they emerged in response to the Canadian initiative on maternal and child health for the 2010 G8 and G20 summits. Using Sara Ruddick’s work on maternal thinking as a theoretical lens, I will argue that specific images of motherhood were used by the Canadian government: first, they emphasized the vulnerability and powerlessness of women as mothers; second, they drew a marked distinction between ‘good mothers’ and ‘bad women’, notable in the Canadian government’s refusal to allocate funding for abortion as part of the initiative; and third, they served to obfuscate the root causes of maternal and child mortality – gender inequality. The second part of the paper will focus more closely on Ruddick’s arguments, and will argue that these have been, and continue to form, the basis for a critical, feminist understanding of the ethics and practices of mothering and care. Ruddick’s maternal thinking has a crucial role to play not only in the politics of peace, but in the ethics and practices of international politics broadly understood.

Abigail Ruane (USA) - abigail.ruane@gmail.com

Catia C. Confortini, Wellesley College (USA) – cconfort@wellesley.edu

### **Pursuing Just Peace: Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* as Peace Epistemology**

How is it possible to pursue more just forms of peace in our world? This paper responds to calls for a feminist theory/peace studies collaboration by integrating work on feminist care ethics and peace education. We take Sara Ruddick’s maternal thinking as a point of departure. Ruddick has often been accused of essentializing women as mothers and making empirically unsustainable and normatively undesirable associations between mothering and peace. We respond to these critiques by arguing that maternal thinking is best understood as a feminist **epistemology** for pursuing just peace. Peace Studies, postcolonial and feminist scholars point to “othering” as a process conducive to and reinforcing asymmetrical power relations at the individual, national

and international level. This process leads to unjust social, economic and political structures and eventually to violent conflict. We propose that Ruddick's contributions to a theory of just peace is the identification of an epistemological inclination toward encounters with 'the other' that enables relationships that are substantively inclusive and empowering, rather than seductively inclusive and colonial. We use Maria Montessori, Paulo Freire, and Elise Boulding to reinforce our arguments by showing how peace education as an empowering process involves a constant slaloming across the boundaries between self and other, between teacher and learner. We conclude from this observation that feminist peace epistemology recognizes that knowing is simultaneously individual and collective, autonomous and interdependent, aware of power asymmetries yet not determined by them.

Ali Watson, University of St. Andrews (UK) - [amsw@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:amsw@st-andrews.ac.uk)

### **The Craft of Radical Motherhood**

Sara Ruddick wrote that '[a] women's politics of resistance is identified by three characteristics: its participants are women, they explicitly invoke their culture's symbols of femininity, and their purpose is to resist certain practices or policies of their governors'. This paper examines the ways in which women, mothers in particular, use the so-called 'fiber arts' - knitting, quilting and crochet - as an example of radical practice at the international level. Whilst a number of feminist authors have expressed concern at the growing interest in such practice in the West, others have argued that this 'new domesticity' allows women to regain power on their terms by valuing themselves and their personal domestic labor in a new way. There is also an argument for recognizing the significance of craft in creating empowerment in the global South. This paper examines the empirical evidence for and against each of these arguments, in order to re-conceptualize the politics of domesticity, and the ways in which we refer to the practices that define it. Moreover the practices, meanings and communities involved in the fiber arts prompt a re-interpretation of the agency that craft may give to mothers and the current political possibilities that it may engender. Through this analysis, this paper demonstrates that what Richard Sennett has called 'the thousand little everyday moves that add up to a sum in practice' may, in terms of activist mothering, have resulted in a form of resistance that challenges existing methods of political action.