

# Reframing Motherhood as an Ethic of Collective Care

From [Dr. Azadeh Sobout, Mothers Against Dairy](#)

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I was born in Iran. Throughout my childhood and adult years, my father was a significant influence and through him I became well acquainted with the philosophy and practice of vegetarianism. As a Muslim, I had also become attuned to how our faith systems are embedded in the ways we acknowledge, honour and respect our relationship with nature and the universe. In Islamic tradition, relationship to the material world is not one of possession but trust. We as humans are being entrusted with the World. It is a relationship of trustee, not of ownership, and hence our obligation is the pursuit of justice at its core.

After being a vegetarian for 5 years myself, I had gradually started taking conscious steps toward adopting a vegan lifestyle before our first son was born in 2020. A few months prior to his birth, I joined the largest global vegan parenting community on Facebook to learn from other parents' experiences in raising vegan families. Becoming a mother during the global coronavirus pandemic, while the world was experiencing devastating socio-economic disruption as well as public health and existential crises, I came to think about radical visions of motherhood. Preparing to be a mother during a time of so much planetary suffering and fear provided an opportunity for me to rethink received forms of knowing: knowing how to live, how to love, how to relate to others and our planet, how to create family, how to mother. It also led me to want to reclaim motherhood from oppressive, patriarchal systems and influences, and to consciously embody mothering as a liberatory force.

My first son was born in 2020 during the Covid-Breakdown. Far too little attention is given to the fact that [pandemics are overwhelmingly caused by human exploitation of animals](#); through farming them or trading in wildlife. Veganism therefore is the praxis of our shared responsibility to protect nature and humanity. But the real turning point in my consciousness took place when I started to express milk for my baby. I would spend a minimum of 3 hours daily expressing milk to store for him in the first 1.5 years of his life.

The tedious and physically draining task of expressing so much milk prompted me to think of non-human mothers while asking certain questions: Whose ovaries made [the eggs we eat](#)? Why do we consume

these [ovulations](#)? Whose breast made [the milk we drink](#)? Why do we consume the [breast milk intended for babies of another species](#)? Whose womb bore the baby to be [slaughtered for flesh](#)? Why do we exploit, torment and destroy the bodies of others when we have [no biological requirement](#) to consume them?

While breastfeeding my baby, I was devastated to think how newborn calves on dairy farms are [torn from their mothers](#) soon after birth, despite the extreme emotional distress to mother and calf alike. I was horrified to learn that some farmers even put preventative “weaning” rings around the mouths of newborn calves so no matter how hard they try to suckle from their mothers in their brief time with them, they cannot. I could not understand [the cruelty of this industry](#) which rapes female cows; workers slide their entire arm inside a cow’s vagina and forcibly impregnate her with masturbated bull semen. I was appalled to learn how female cows are regularly beaten, mutilated without anaesthetic, forced to live and eat in their own [feces](#) and injected with hormones to make them increase their growth and milk production to unnatural levels while being deprived of sun, grass or the outside world. And even on so-called “[humane](#)” and pastured dairy farms, [mothers and babies suffer horribly](#), no matter how green the grass.

As a mother, I could not sanction the fact that billions of animal mothers are forced to go through this year after year, carrying their babies for nine months only to endure them being stolen within a few days of birth so their milk can be sold to humans instead. I felt gutted about the [endless cycle of desecration](#) animals exploited for dairy are subjected to, treated as machines rather than sentient beings with their own desires and emotions, then sent to slaughter soon after their production levels drop.

In the first instance I would say that motherhood proposed a shift in thinking about veganism for me. Inspired by the legacy of radical and queer black feminists of the 1970s and ’80s, I began to think of motherhood not just as the relationship between a baby and a mother, or parents, in an isolated suburban nursery, but mothering as a perspective that “encompasses the sorrow and the joy that mothers everywhere, whether human, animal, or plant, feel” (Alice Walker, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and activist).

I chose to think of [mothering](#) as a way of being and doing in and *for* this world, rather than simply a label or status bestowed automatically on women by virtue of having given birth or having adopted. There is that admonition from the Buddha, “Love the whole world as a mother loves her only child.” The idea that being a mother could mean extending a maternal ethic of care and nurturing toward every one, human and nonhuman, allowed me to use my freedom more purposefully to understand the experience of other marginalised mothers. In my day-to-day work, I have been involved in racial, economic, reproductive, gender, and food justice and have witnessed the challenges that many mothers face every day. I have seen how undocumented migrants and refugee workers are psychologically impacted by the poor and hazardous conditions of working in slaughterhouses. Slaughterhouse work has been linked to PTSD, an increase in crime rates, domestic abuse, and drug and alcohol use. As the demand for meat, dairy, and other animal products increases, so does the number of people directly affected by these harmful industries.

Throughout the years, as an academic and an activist, community organiser and human rights advocate, I have come to realize that a crucial part of changing the system lies in not just identifying as a human rights activist or advocate, but in taking a stand as an individual, and acknowledging the importance of individual choices. Approaching motherhood as a site of reflection upon the injustices that pervade our lives, I am prompted to examine my own role as a mother, and my maternal pedagogy, in the context of care, community, and radical politics.

With my first son turning three and awaiting the arrival of our second son, I am more than ever convinced that avoiding meat and dairy is the “[single biggest way](#)” to reduce our impact on the planet. Ditching meat and dairy, consuming sustainably grown produce, working with nature’s cycles, supporting small-scale farming and permaculture; many [solutions to meet our food demand](#) are slower, lower tech, healthier, lower impact, and far more ethical. And crucially, they are also within many people’s reach, offering possibilities for autonomy from multinationals and their machines.

The meat and dairy industries continue to draw heavy criticism for their [outsized role in climate change](#) – mainly through deforestation for animal feed crops and methane emissions from burping cows. Animal foods also require far more precious water than plant foods. In fact, 70 percent of the world’s freshwater is used for animal agriculture, which could be diverted to grow plants (which feed more people) and provide fresh water directly to communities.

The research also shows that a balanced, wholefood vegan diet is packed with a wide range of healthy, disease-fighting foods high in vegetable protein, fibre, complex carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, good fats, and important micronutrients. Being vegan also means no damaging animal protein, animal fats, cholesterol, or hormones, and [lowers the risk of many diseases](#). Animal milk and other dairy products are the top source of saturated fat, contributing to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and Alzheimer’s disease. When it comes to health, vegans have a significantly reduced risk of heart disease, diabetes, dementia and some cancers, with lowered cholesterol and increased energy levels. Meanwhile, the excessive use of antibiotics to promote unnatural growth and prevent disease in farmed animals is increasingly viewed as a serious global health threat, as children and adults consuming these animals become resistant to antibiotics.

Motherhood has been a profound departure for me. It has prompted me to think about ethical ways of assembling and composing our everyday life in a world urgently in need of care and repair. I believe our ways of mothering and [how we think about motherhood](#) have far-reaching ethical implications; after all, as a mother you are confronting and living your ethic of care at an embodied level every day. We cannot speak of love, compassion, nurture, and mercy, yet remain silent on industries that do not afford any of these to our nonhuman animal kin. For me, the ultimate question is how our acts of mothering can help us rethink and shape the kind of social and political future we want. How we can learn to live for more than ourselves, and remain devoted and accountable to a future that we cannot always see.

*Dr. [Azadeh Sobout](#) is an independent feminist researcher who brings together environmental politics, feminism, activism, and relations of power in her academic and political work, and strives to connect theory, practice and political organising. As a scholar, she conducts research and teaches across the broad field of human rights and social justice, including criminology, transitional justice, gender in global politics and post-conflict reconstruction. Working with marginalised communities, she interrogates social and spatial injustices to promote local based action and intervention within sites of injustice.*





