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### **Protecting Children from Environmental Toxins is Mother's New Job**

(May 2014) – Mothers take pride in protecting their children, but a recent study shows that job is becoming more complex. Because of increasing health risks from environmental chemicals, mothers are spending more time and resources trying to ensure their children's safety and well-being, while class differences mean that not all mothers can do what they would like to protect their children.

The study, "[More Work for Mother: Chemical Body Burdens as a Maternal Responsibility](#)" to appear in the October 2014 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology, examines the lengths mothers go to manage their children's exposure to environmental chemicals.

"Precautionary Consumption" is how sociologist Norah MacKendrick describes the efforts of mothers avoiding foods and everyday products that contain chemicals they fear will be harmful to the development of their children. MacKendrick's research finds that mothers begin to control their personal exposure to chemicals as early as pre-conception, but especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Many mothers continue to monitor their children's exposure to chemicals throughout early childhood and into adolescence.

Recent reports from national health agencies in the United States and Canada have found hundreds of synthetic chemicals as part of the human body burden, including pesticides, lead, mercury, bisphenol A (BPA), phthalates, and brominated flame retardants (Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention 2009; Health Canada 2010; Washburn 2013).

## **The Study**

MacKendrick interviewed 25 women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to explore how mothers and mothers-to-be practiced precautionary consumption to guard their child from environmental chemicals. Nearly all of the participants believed that precautionary consumption was primarily a mother's responsibility, and these women felt deeply responsible for their children's health. One respondent, a middle-class mother of three children commented on how her awareness of environmental chemicals developed while breastfeeding:

*“You have a child and they're perfect, then you start thinking when you're nursing, ‘Everything I'm eating is going through to that perfect baby.’”*

Mothers worried about exposing their children to pesticides, BPA, hormones in meat, and chemicals in cleaning products. Some were concerned that these compounds might contribute to early puberty and behavioral disorders in their children. Even women who didn't have children described their bodies as vulnerable places for environmental chemicals that could one day affect their children. These women were especially concerned about the impact of chemicals on their fertility.

## **Precautionary Consumption: A standard we all strive for**

Most of the middle- and working-class mothers in the study wanted to be able to exercise some control via precautionary consumption. The low-income mothers in MacKendrick's study lacked the time and financial resources to carry out the same level of precautionary consumption. Many of these women could barely afford to feed their families on their small incomes, let alone purchase costly organic foods and non-toxic products.

MacKendrick found that most of her middle-class participants downplayed the amount of time, money, and hassle required to do precautionary consumption. She reasons that women accept this extra work because more and more studies link children's health problems to mother's lifestyles and consumer choices.

Regardless of economic background, all of the women in the study believed precautionary consumption to be important to the overall health of their children, and practiced some form of it. MacKendrick points out that while precautionary consumption provides women with a sense of control over their children's health, this approach also minimizes the responsibility of government regulators and chemical producers in the prevention of environmental toxins.

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**Source:** MacKendrick, Norah. 2014. "[More Work for Mother: Chemical Body Burdens as a Maternal Responsibility](#)" forthcoming in October *Gender & Society*.

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### **Related Experts**

#### *Interviews available upon request*

Andrew Szasz, Professor and Chair of Environmental Studies, University of California Santa Cruz, Author of *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves*, [szasz@ucsc.edu](mailto:szasz@ucsc.edu)

Kate Cairns, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, "Feeding the organic child: Mothering through ethical consumption," [kate.cairns@utoronto.ca](mailto:kate.cairns@utoronto.ca)

Rachel Washburn, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Loyola Marymount University, Author of "Measuring Personal Chemical Exposures Through Biomonitoring: The Experiences of Research Participants," [Rachel.Washburn@lmu.edu](mailto:Rachel.Washburn@lmu.edu)

Jennifer A. Reich, Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado-Denver, Author of "Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice," [jreich@du.edu](mailto:jreich@du.edu)

### **Further information**

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on twitter: [@Gend\\_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at [misra@soc.umass.edu](mailto:misra@soc.umass.edu).

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at [jsprague@ku.edu](mailto:jsprague@ku.edu). Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and [facebook.com/SocWomen](https://facebook.com/SocWomen).