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## Conversations with the Experts

### MomsRising: Online Grassroots Organizing Around Family Issues



**Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner**

**Bio:** Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner is a co-founder and the Executive Director of MomsRising.org. MomsRising has a goal is to bring millions of people, who all share a common concern about the need to build a more family-friendly America, together as a non-partisan force for 2008 and beyond. This grassroots, online effort is mobilizing mothers, and all who have mothers, across America as a cohesive force for change. Started this May 2006, MomsRising already has over 50,000 citizen members, as well as more than fifty (and growing) aligned national organizations, working together to create positive solutions for the future.

With MomsRising co-founder and President, Joan Blades (who is also co-founder of MoveOn.org), Rowe-Finkbeiner is also the co-author of *The Motherhood Manifesto*. Released on Mothers Day 2006, *The Motherhood Manifesto* makes the

case that it's time for a broad change in America's support for mothers and families. In both public and private sectors, radical shifts are needed to make parenting and the workplace compatible. The Motherhood Manifesto identifies and challenges the obstacles facing working mothers today, and proposes concrete solutions.

In 2005, Rowe-Finkbeiner's book *The F-Word: Feminism in Jeopardy*, was awarded first place by the Independent Book Publishers Association in the category of Women's Issues. Rowe-Finkbeiner writes frequently about public policy, motherhood, health, and new feminism and many of her articles are currently being used in women's studies classes across the nation. In 2006, she was given an Excellence in Journalism award by the Society of Professional Journalists. Rowe-Finkbeiner's writing also appears in the anthology, *The Essential Hip Mama: Writing from the Cutting Edge of Motherhood*.

Rowe-Finkbeiner has been deeply involved in cutting edge politics and policy analysis for over a decade. More recently she's worked as a consultant in the field of political strategy and policy analysis. And previously, during her tenure as Political and Field Director of the Washington Conservation Voters, the political arm of the environmental movement in Washington State, she created a model statewide program to elect, endorse, and support environmentally responsible candidates.

Rowe-Finkbeiner is currently President of the Washington Environmental Alliance for Voter Education (WEAVE), an organization that is heavily involved in electoral engagement and serves on the state board of directors for the Washington Conservation Voters. She lives in Washington State with her husband and two children.

### An Interview with Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

**Corday:** How did MomsRising.org get started?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** Joan Blades, the co-founder of MoveOn.org, and I co-wrote a book called *The Motherhood Manifesto* that talks about the six things we can do to make our country more family-friendly. After writing that book, we decided that it was important to develop an avenue for grassroots action. We used the MoveOn model to start MomsRising.org, which is an organization for online grassroots organizing around motherhood and family issues.

**Corday:** What core issues make up the M.O.T.H.E.R. acronym discussed in *The Motherhood Manifesto* and online?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** Motherhood and family issues are all tied together and they all intersect. To start at the beginning, and show the linkages between these issues with the first example, let's go to "M":

"M" is for maternity and paternity leave, which is really paid family leave. The United States is only one of four countries, out of 168 studied, that does not have some form of paid family leave for new mothers. [i] This lack of paid family leave has been tied to our increased child mortality rate. The World Health Organization rates the U.S. at 37th of all nations for our mortality rate of children under five years old. [ii] This is despite the fact that we spend more per capita on healthcare than any other country in the world. [iii] It's important to examine the roots of such problems, and studies show one root of our high childhood mortality rate is our lack of paid family leave. [iv] Another contributor is the fact that many children do not have adequate health care coverage, which I'll discuss under "H."

Another related problem is that in the United States, childcare is incredibly expensive, particularly infant childcare. Studies show, on average, childcare costs between \$4,000 and \$10,000 per year, per child. [v] We don't have a national subsidized childcare program. There's a great model in the U.S. military, which has a subsidized childcare program based on a sliding scale using the caregiver's income, which I'll discuss under "E." And, because our federal minimum wage has been stagnant at \$5.15 an hour for so long this contributes to these family issues. People who work year round at \$5.15 per hour make about \$10,000 per year. This low minimum wage is tied to paid family leave and childcare because if you have one child whose care costs \$10,000 per year, and you work for minimum wage, then you're at a zero sum. I'll discuss that under "R" for Realistic and Fair Wages. So, the lack of paid family leave in America really affects the poverty that many new parents experience. In the United States, a quarter of all families with children under age six live in poverty. Having a baby is a leading cause of poverty, and we can easily see how that happens without paid family leave, with high childcare costs, and with our low minimum wages.

Countries that do provide paid family leave and subsidized childcare, don't have a "mommy wage hit" to the degree that we experience here. Our mommy wage hit is incredibly high: One study found that women without children make 90 cents to a man's dollar, married mothers make 73 cents to a man's dollar, and single mothers make 56 to 66 cents to a man's dollar. [vi] The lack of family-friendly policies reduces the wages of mothers. Since 82 percent of women do have children, and 72 percent of mothers are in the workforce, this negatively impacts the economic success of our country.

"O" stands for open, flexible workplaces. With open, flexible work options we can have a win-win situation in which parents and other workers are empowered to have flexible work options in a variety of different jobs, while at the same time companies are able to increase their bottom lines. In the book, we have several examples of companies that have increased their bottom lines after implementing flexible work policies. Best Buy, Google, Johnson Moving and Storage, and Jet Blue are just a few of the companies that are embracing flexible work options for employees. Studies show that employees who have flexible work options are more satisfied with their jobs, and are also much more loyal to their employers. Companies then experience lower turnover rates, lower recruitment and training costs, as well as higher job performance, as employees are better able to balance work and family. There's no one way to balance work and family, as we all know, and there are many different examples of flexible work options in the book that are very exciting. One moving and storage company allows many employees to work at home and to put in their forty hours at any time they choose during the week, as long as the work gets done. All of Jet Blue's reservation specialists now work out of their homes. Best Buy is a great example of a company that's changed their workplace culture; they allow flexible work throughout their corporate offices and have seen a big increase in their bottom line.

"T" is television and other after-school programs. We really wanted to include something about television; it's a topic that concerns all parents. The amount of television each child watches has increased dramatically over the last ten years. One study estimates that by the time a child gets to elementary school, they will have viewed 8,000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence on television. [vii] The television portion of the chapter is about teaching children media literacy and using available technologies such as the V-chip to control the programs that your child views in your own home. Using the V-chip you can block out violent content from your television if you so choose; but many families don't know that they have that option or don't know how to use it, so we teach them how to do so in the book. Television viewing ties into after-school programs, because right now a total of more than fourteen million kindergarten through twelfth grade students are home alone after school without supervision. Of that group, more than 40,000 kindergartners are home alone. [viii] After-school time between 3:00 and 6:00 PM is a vulnerable time for many children; it's the time with the highest juvenile crime rate. Providing after-school programs can bring a return up to \$13.00 for every \$1 spent, depending on the child, throughout their lifetime because of decreased costs of interaction with the juvenile justice system, decreased grade repetition, and decreased teen pregnancy rates. Many of the kids who are home alone are sitting in front of the television, hence the reason we tie in television with after-school programs.

“H” is healthcare for all kids, with an acknowledgement that we really need healthcare for everyone. As I mentioned above, despite the considerable amount the U.S. spends on healthcare, it's tied for 28th highest life expectancy and is 37th for mortality rate of children under five. Furthermore, bankruptcies due to health care issues have skyrocketed in the past few years—there has been a 2,300% increase in these kinds of bankruptcies between 1981 and 2001. [ix] Interestingly, 76 percent of those who declare bankruptcy due to healthcare issues had health care before the declaration. Obviously, our health care system is failing. We are one of the only Western nations that does not have some form of universal health care. We have companies that are leaving the U.S. and going to places like Canada because U.S. health care costs are so high for them. It's not working for employees, it's not working for employers, and it's time to face those facts. Kids are a no-brainer to provide with universal coverage. On average, kids have lower health care costs than adults and the investment in preventative care is repaid later. There are currently nine million American children with no health care coverage and many more with inadequate coverage. [x]

“E” is excellent childcare. I discussed the high cost of childcare above. One factor that a lot of people don't talk about is that childcare workers are among the lowest paid workers in our society, which is a huge problem. Not only is it a problem for the workers, but it also leads to extremely high turnover rates. One study of childcare centers in California found a 76 percent turnover rate over four years. [xi] Again, the U.S. Military has an amazing childcare system for its employees. The care is customized, parents pay on a sliding scale according to their salaries, and the compensation for childcare providers is much better than average.

Early childhood education is incredibly important. One study shows that for every dollar spent on quality early childcare, you get at least seven dollars back later, as children are more literate, obtain better employment, are more likely to get secondary education, and are less likely to be drop-outs, dependent on welfare or arrested. [xii]

“R” is realistic and fair wages. One strategy includes putting family-friendly policies into place, which might help eliminate the aforementioned “mommy wage gap.” The other issue is the need to raise the minimum wage. The majority of people who hold minimum wage jobs are the key wage earner for their family; it's not just teenagers who hold these jobs. More women than men are stuck in minimum wage jobs, and minimum wage jobs are the ones least likely to have any sort of flexibility. This means people can have great difficulty keeping these jobs when they have to, for example, deal with a family emergency.

**Corday:** Can you talk about your goal of making MomsRising a “massive grassroots online resource?”

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** We started MomsRising.org in May of this year and already have about 50,000 members. We're really relying on word of mouth and friend-to-friend contact. We conduct at least one e-outreach per week to our members, in which we provide information, surveys, or a way to take action via petitions or directly contacting elected officials or people in the media. We provide a variety of ways citizens can get engaged such as sharing personal stories, reading other people's stories, talking in our online forum, and contacting elected officials. There are multiple ways in which people can get involved with MomsRising.org. We are working with over forty aligned organizations that concentrate on women, children, health care, family, democracy issues, and more; there's a complete list on our web site at <http://www.momsrising.org/aboutmomsrising#aligned>. We often highlight the actions of other groups on our web site as well as through our e-outreaches, and they often share our activities with their members as well. We're all part of a broad community building momentum for change.

**Corday:** How did you select the participants in your group blog, and how does the blog itself work? Do you think the blog has helped encourage discussion about MomsRising.org and its core issues in the general blogosphere?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** That's hard to say, but I think it has. Sometimes our blog entries get picked up and discussed on other blogs, which is great. Our bloggers are some of the leading voices on this topic. Miriam Peskowitz has a blog of her own, Playground Revolution, at <http://www.playgroundrevolution.com>, and wrote a great book called *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*. Our daddy blogger, Chip, who also blogs with <http://daddy-dialectic.blogspot.com>, was noted in Time magazine, so we became aware of him through the magazine. Most contributors have their own blogs as well as participating in our blog—there are about ten writers that participate on a rotating basis.

**Casey:** Our academic affiliates investigate numerous work-family issues. What areas of research would help MomsRising?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** Any research about women and families is helpful to us. We always want to hear about new research and talk about it in the blog. People can e-mail me ([kristin@momsrising.org](mailto:kristin@momsrising.org)) about new research

at any time. Also, if people join MomsRising, they can see our agenda and contribute. There's also the option of showing the film and using the book in classes—we've had a lot of positive feedback from professors who have seen an early cut of the film.

**Casey:** In what kinds of classes should the film be shown?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** Definitely gender studies and women's issues. Possibly economics and business classes, if they're dealing with work-life balance issues. We'd love the film to be shown in all classes, of course!

**Corday:** How can workplace practitioners support the activities of MomsRising?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** We encourage them to join MomsRising to keep us informed of workplace practices that support our agenda so we can showcase them to others. We're very interested in highlighting the positive changes many businesses are making to facilitate better work/life policies. And, we rely on many people, companies, and organizations to keep us updated about important issues for our grassroots work. As far as businesses go, we're starting a new outreach program with a business advisory circle. Any business interested in participating can contact me, and I can put them in touch with the appropriate person. With that program, we're really hoping to start a searchable online discussion about successful business practices that organizations and businesses can share with other employers. Open, flexible work options look different in different types of jobs, and our goal is to facilitate businesses talking to each other to share what works best. We're in the development stage with this project, so we're open to hearing from businesses on what they would find most useful.

**Corday:** How can state policy legislators and their staffs support your efforts?

**Rowe-Finkbeiner:** We have an exciting new program! We're working with a group called the Progressive States Network to distribute a menu of model state legislation ideas for each of the M.O.T.H.E.R. points. We're hoping to mail the model legislation, a copy of *The Motherhood Manifesto*, as well as the documentary film that's coming out on the *Manifesto*, to a minimum of 1500 state legislators across the country. The film covers the issues discussed in the book and it's organized using the M.O.T.H.E.R. acronym. To mark the release of the film in September, we're planning a series of house parties with our and other organizations across the country. We're definitely looking for support and feedback for our model legislation package, which will be going out in the next month. There's tremendous potential in sharing what's worked in some states, and offering ideas for the best possible scenarios and guidelines for dealing with work and family issues from a state legislative perspective. Commitment to help pass some of the model state legislation would be incredibly helpful as well!

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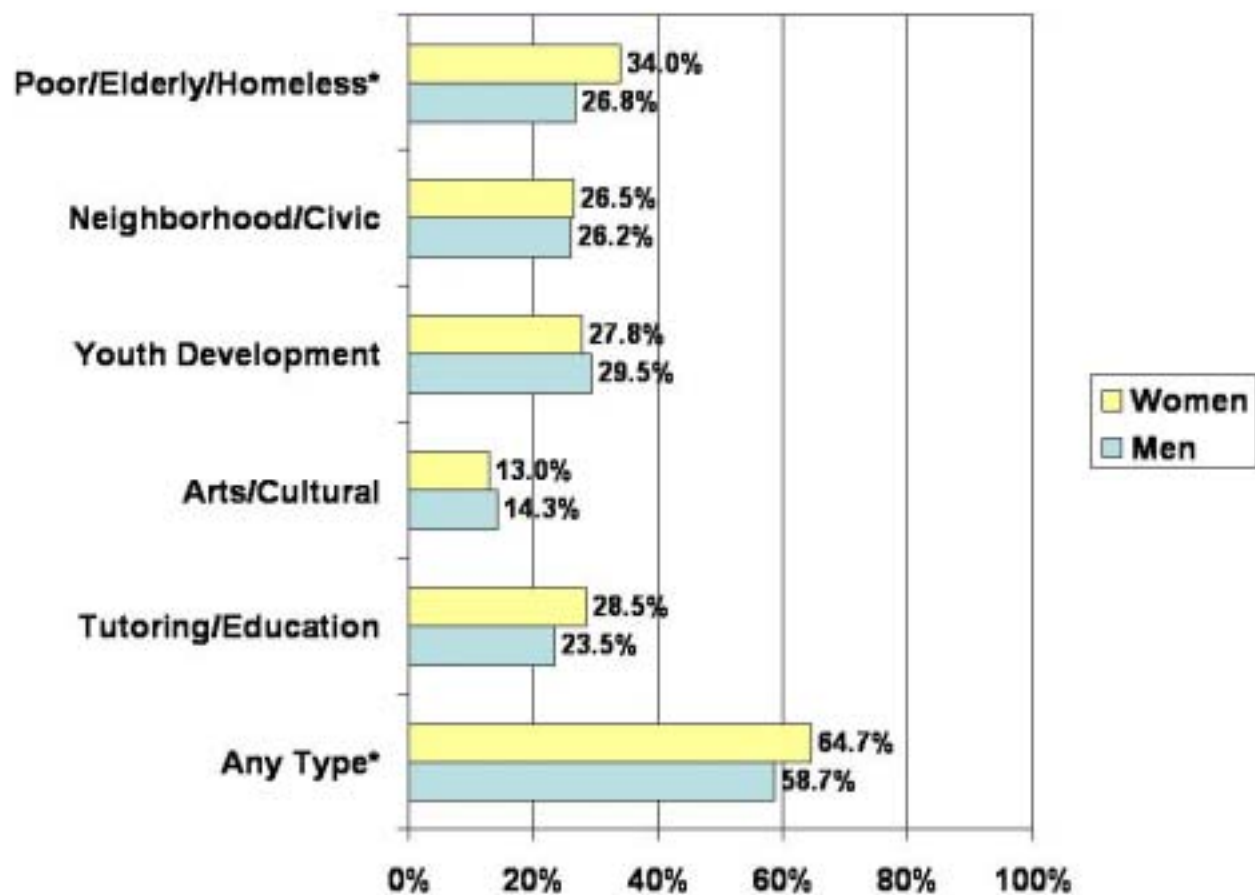
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Please visit MomsRising at <http://www.momsrising.org>. You may purchase *The Motherhood Manifesto* at the site, as well as *The Motherhood Manifesto* documentary DVD.

You may e-mail Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner at [kristin@momsrising.org](mailto:kristin@momsrising.org).


### Civic Involvement Among Men and Women



\* Differences significant at  $p < .01$ .

**Source:** Caiazza, A. (2001, September). Women's community involvement: The effects of money, safety, parenthood, and friends. *Institute for Women's Policy Research, Publication #C346*. Retrieved November 16, 2006, from <http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/civic.pdf>.


## Additional Resources Related to Grassroots Organizing and Work-Family

 **Global Perspectives – ACORN:** “ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, is the nation’s largest community organization of low- and moderate-income families, working together for social justice and stronger communities. Since 1970, ACORN has grown to more than 220,000 member families, organized in 850 neighborhood chapters in over 100 cities across the U.S. and in cities in Canada, the Dominican Republic and Peru.”

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.acorn.org>.

**Center on Budget and Policy Priorities:** “The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is one of the nation’s premier policy organizations working at the federal and state levels on fiscal policy and public programs that affect low- and moderate-income families and individuals. The Center conducts research and analysis to inform public debates over proposed budget and tax policies and to help ensure that the needs of low-income families and individuals are considered in these debates. We also develop policy options to alleviate poverty, particularly among working families.”

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.cbpp.org>.

 **Global Perspectives – The Citizen’s Handbook: A Guide to Building Community:** This handbook by the Vancouver Citizen’s Committee is a guide to community organizing, and includes activities, articles, case studies, a bibliography and links to other sites devoted to community development and citizen involvement.

- To access the website, click here: <http://vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook/>.

**Families USA:** “Families USA is a national nonprofit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the achievement of high-quality, affordable health care for all Americans.” Activities include “managing a grassroots advocates’ network of organizations and individuals working for the consumer perspective in national and state health policy debates.”

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.familiesusa.org/index.html>

**MOTHERS: Mothers Ought To Have Equal Rights:** MOTHERS is a grassroots, diverse network of mothers, fathers, grandparents and other adults who are family caregivers. We are coming together to promote the economic, social and political worth and importance of family child and dependent care. We are bringing together a coalition of individuals and organizations to improve the economic security of those who do caring work.”

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.mothersoughttohaveequalrights.org>.

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