

Unequal Genders: Mothers and Fathers on Mountains

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Women's emancipation, women-only climbing, women-only clubs and guided climbs are all factors in the controversial past of mountaineering. Since Maria Paradis reached the summit of Mont Blanc in 1808, the first documented female ascent, women have struggled to succeed in the male dominated sport of mountaineering. In the Victorian Era, women such as Annie Smith Peck and Elizabeth Le Blond summited high peaks, ranging from in the Himalayas to South America, despite the negative attention they received. These women allowed generations of other women who wished to follow in their footsteps to climb, despite the continual male domination of the sport. However, a heated topic amongst women mountaineers themselves, the mountaineering community in general and mountaineering literature concerns the issue of motherhood. The question of whether women who are mothers should climb mountains is an important one in the climbing community and, as of yet, has not been fully addressed in the climbing literature. This question is not posed as critically to men who are father and who climb mountains, if at all, which is evidence that there are still different expectations about men and women's right to climb. Within this article I will address this issue of unequal gender expectations within the climbing community. I will make use of climbing literature, media representations and situate my points in a historical context. This is a new area to receive academic attention and so most information is derived from more popular sources and interviews with contemporary climbers.

Most of the literature written by male mountaineers rarely, if ever, mentions the subject of fatherhood, families and any concerns regarding their participation in a sport that could potentially leave families fatherless. As well, very few female mountaineers in their writings touch on the subject of motherhood and the struggle they face to balance being a mother with the intense desire to climb mountains; however, when issues around families and parenting are raised it is usually offered by women mountaineers. A select

few women write very candidly about their dual role of mother and mountaineer and their views will be discussed later.

Lene Gammelgaard, the first Danish woman to summit Everest, survived the 1996 Everest tragedy. She writes very candidly of the bodies littering the mountain and the messages they conveyed to the climbers. She wrote of her team mates discovering half of a severed body marking the way to the sketchy ice slopes: 'The corpse lies on the approach to the difficult climb up the icy face of Lhotse, serving as both a guide and a warning about where we might end up...The South Col is notorious for its inhabitants: Deep-frozen corpses last a long time and move only with the fury of the elements' (Gammelgaard, 2000:116). Both Huey and Gammelgaard are clear in their writings that death and mountaineering are closely tied.

However, what is interesting in the context of my article is that Huey does not mention how the risk of death or serious injury influences his climbing and whether he has a family or not; but Gammelgaard makes it clear that she will not mix mountaineering and motherhood. Many of the men on Gammelgaard's team are fathers and she does not hesitate to engage in conversations with them about this fact. In *Climbing High* (2000) she voices her own opinion regarding mothers and fathers on mountains after speaking with her team mate, Klev Schoening, about his young family at home:

'Being a woman, and I hope, a mother someday, I cannot respect men who have kids and simultaneously participate in this deadly game...I imagine that when I choose to have children, I will give up my participation in the race to summit the fourteen 8,000 meter peaks. The way I see it now, it's an either/or situation because the risk of dying while climbing is so huge. Just study a few expedition accounts to calculate - the odds are bad!' (Gammelgaard, 2000: 71)

Gammelgaard is one of the few women to write about her disapproval for men who are fathers who seek the summits and of her decision to stop climbing once she is a mother. Other writers that attempt to explore similar issues are Maria Coffey (2003) *Where the*

Mountain Casts its Shadow and David Rose and Ed Douglas (2000) in their biography of Alison Hargreaves, *Regions of the Heart*.

Rose and Douglas (2000) argue that the media pilloried the UK female climber, Alison Hargreaves, when she left her two children and husband in August 1995 and subsequently died in a violent storm on K2. The question of women who are mothers on mountains, and whether they should be involved in climbing, is raised in the media every few years when a woman, who happens also to be a mother, dies on a mountain. The ferocity by which the media portray such misfortunes (in highly gendered terms) is evidence of the unequal treatment given to women who choose to raise a family and who also seek summits to climb, in comparison to male mountaineers who have families. Media coverage of female mountaineers always emphasises that the deceased woman was a mother first and only, in a secondary capacity, acknowledges if she was an experienced mountaineer.

The media portrayed Hargreaves as a selfish woman who only thought of herself. She was depicted as a woman who was commercially driven and led a life where climbing came first and everything else was secondary to this (Rose and Douglas, 2000: 273). Overall, representations of Hargreaves in the press labelled her selfish and obsessed and stated that climbing came first for her, whilst her children were clearly second to her mountaineering ambitions.

In *A Hard Day's Summer* (1994), which is an account written by Hargreaves regarding her experiences soloing all six of the Alps classic north faces, she tells an entirely different story regarding her climbing ambitions and children. After completing her solo of the Eiger (1993) she wrote: 'I went to the children's playground. Tom and Kate were engrossed on the rope roundabout. I sat on the wall to watch, not wanting to disturb them, but longing for a cuddle. Tom spotted me, leapt down and charged across to hug me. Kate, seeing her brother leap off, wondered what all the excitement was about and she came and joined Tom and me. We walked back to the tents together to meet JB' (Hargreaves, 1994: 80). Hargreaves' book is filled with similar accounts of affection for her children. The reader gets a sense of a woman who dearly loves her children but who also feels an overwhelming obligation to the mountains. She also

describes her joy at passing her love of climbing on to her children. Similar to many male mountaineers' accounts, however, she does not, here explore the possibility of her own death in the mountains and the effect it will have on her family.

To fully understand Alison Hargreaves, it is essential to read the aforementioned Rose and Douglas biography (2000), as a companion to *A Hard Day's Summer*. Their book *Regions of the Heart* is concerned with Hargreaves' struggle to marry the constraints of being a woman, mountaineer, and a mother. Rose and Douglas reveal Hargreaves' deepest fear to be getting frostbite and losing her fingers because then she would have to raise her children without being able to hold them (Rose and Douglas, 2000: 202). An explanation as to why she did not raise this concern in her own book could be her fear of negative press, and therefore, loss of sponsorship. Elsewhere, though, Hargreaves has pondered such issues. In an interview in 1994, Hargreaves unequivocally spoke about the risks of mountaineering and her possible death:

'Everybody takes risks in whatever they do and for some people the risks are higher. I certainly wouldn't want to see my children without a mother. Or even worse a seriously incapacitated mother through frostbite or brain damage. But at the end of the day I wouldn't not go to Everest because of that. I have weighed the risks and I believe they are worth taking.' (Douglas, 1998: 37)

How Hargreaves' death was portrayed in the wider media and discussed in climbing circles reveals interesting gendered assumptions about risk and motherhood. Polly Toynbee, a liberal UK newspaper columnist, published many articles about Hargreaves' 'reckless' behaviour. She stated, 'What is interesting about Alison Hargreaves is that she behaved like a man' (cited in Rose and Douglas, 2000: 274). Hargreaves, according to Toynbee, behaved like a stereotypical man because she left her family and was willing to risk her life in order to reach the summit of K2. In 'Women, Freedom and Risk', an article in *Climber* magazine, Douglas (1998) also raises the idea of Hargreaves' achievements in terms of gender:

'In a male-dominated world, which Alpinism was when she started and largely remains, she could be as uncompromising and ambitious as any man. It's something that a number of her male contemporaries have mentioned, as though it were surprising that a women could be quite so driven.' (Douglas, 1998: 37)

According to the societal bounds of British and U.S. mountaineering communities, women are less likely to be driven enough to achieve the world's highest peaks, in comparison to men.

From the way Hargreaves' death has been represented in the international media, it can be seen that it was largely assumed to be morally acceptable for a man who is a father to take the risks in mountaineering that can ultimately lead to death, but it is not acceptable for a woman who is a mother to do the same; or rather the fact men leave behind families to scale the world's highest and most dangerous peaks is never usually problematised. Paul Nunn and Geoff Tier, both skilled mountaineers and fathers, died on a mountain near K2 a few days before Hargreaves' death. These men, in contrast to Hargreaves, were not criticized in the international press for being selfish and taking risks that put their lives in danger and left their children fatherless (Rose and Douglas, 2000: 276).

Despite the media's portrayal of parenting and mountaineering in gendered terms where only female mountaineers are considered, many fathers who choose to spend a number of years on mountains do in fact struggle with the same issues as women who are mothers, who choose to climb. Andy Kirkpatrick, a British climber and writer, mentions his difficulty when leaving for the Alps in 2003:

'Ella's four now and at the airport she started crying. It's the first time that's happened. I thought, My number's up soon. When there is competition between my kids and climbing, I shall stop. Which is terrible for my wife, because I wouldn't stop for her.' (cited in Coffey, 2003:155)

At a later date, in an informal conversation with me, he stated that he didn't intend for these sentiments to come out sounding so cruel. He suspected he was tired when giving his interview with Coffey (Kirkpatrick, 2006:interview). Kirkpatrick's writings in general tell of the heartsickness he experiences being away from his family. Faced with the same dilemma in his early years Chris Bonnington, a British climber and writer, never stopped climbing, despite his young family and the strain it put on his wife by his being away for long periods. His writings rarely relay any insights into his family life, but in interviews he has been more candid. He commented: 'At the end of the day, climbing probably is irresponsible. But we're better parents because we're doing things that fulfil us' (cited in Coffey, 2003:163).

A voice often missing within the climbing literature, with regards to the impact on families of parents who choose to climb and leave their families for long periods of time, is the children who have been left without a mother or father due to mountaineering accidents. Sara Burke's father, Mick, died on Everest in 1975 when she was two years old. Sarah said about her father:

'There's a part of me that thinks it was better he went to Everest instead of staying at home with us because it was his duty. Then there's another part of me that thinks, Damn you! He knew the dangers, and he took the risk anyway. I do feel angry with him. But to go too closely into that means examining whether he loved climbing more than he loved us. And that's not somewhere I'm prepared to go yet.' (cited in Coffey, 2003:180)

Mountaineering is about dangers and the risks involved and something all mountaineers, regardless of gender, must consider before committing to a mountain. A big wall climber and father said, 'Ultimately the thing with serious climbing is that it will kill you in the end. Each climber has to decide if it is worth it for him or herself' (Lake, 2005). As I have already argued, a difference between men and women mountaineers is that mothers receive opprobrium for climbing, whereas the fathers are generally free to do so without facing criticism. Therefore, it could then be argued that such negative

representations of women mountaineers influence women's decisions of whether or not to climb in the first place.

To explain contemporary attitudes to women with families who climb mountains, we need to put these issues into a historical context. For example, the pre-war climbers in the UK and the US did not acknowledge the burden of balancing motherhood and mountaineering within their writings. The literature scarcely mentions children, if at all. The main focus of these early women mountaineers was to prove that women could achieve the same things as men. Yet, after World War II women no longer were primarily concerned about proving they could do the same as men in the climbing world. Instead, they often wanted to emphasise the differences in the sexes (Pugh, 1992: 350). After World War I, the mountaineering literature written by women provides slight references to the existence of family life, but nothing beyond mentioning having children. However, the literature following World War II demonstrates women attempting to alter the conditions placed upon them to balance their (perceived) conflicting roles of mother and mountaineer.

Among the most prolific World War II writers was Nea Morin, who climbed actively in the 1920s, up until the 1950s, and was an active advocate of *cordee feminine*; an all female rope team. She reveals in *A Woman's Reach* how her climbing life and ambitions changed once she became a mother:

'Jean and I climbed together frequently after we were married, but once we had children we used more often to climb in different parties and, as far as possible, to avoid objective dangers such as loose rock or particularly treacherous glaciers. Although I completely regained my normal physical form about a year after the birth of my children, the additional responsibility was another matter and certainly it limited our ambitions considerably.' (Morin, 1968: 55)

From this excerpt it is clear that the new role of mother limited Morin's mountaineering excursions. First, she no longer climbed with her husband; it is possible that this was so the children could always be with one of their parents and perhaps to keep the likelihood

of the children having one parent left alive, though she never explores the mortality of mountaineers directly within her writings. Mortality and the danger of climbing brings the second sacrifice that Morin underwent with her new role, by not climbing routes of severe difficulty, nor taking the risks that lead to more advanced climbing. Though Morin stresses that her pregnancy weight gain was not a hindrance for her, she does emphasise that being a mother, and the added responsibilities, were restricting her climbing.

In A Woman's Reach, Morin gives another account of the constraints placed upon her sex:

'Their many disadvantages include problems of marriage and motherhood, which cut right across a woman's climbing ambitions. With motherhood there are obviously immense changes, and it almost inevitably entails a gap of at least a year during which any serious climbing is impracticable. For those who wish to carry on climbing and leading every effort has to be made to continue between the births of the children, even if this is possible only for short periods or on outcrops. After too long a gap it is much more difficult to get back into physical and mental condition necessary for leading and for first-class climbing.' (Morin, 1968:201)

The frankness with which Morin writes of how climbing is extremely difficult when undertaken in conjunction with motherhood, is surprising, after decades of literature where even admitting to the existence motherhood was scarcely mentioned. However, by today's standards and expectations of gender equality, the passage reads as an acceptance of traditional gender attitudes and roles. For example, it is never raised or questioned that men might look after the children to allow the women to return to climbing.

Today, whether to climb whilst pregnant is an issue that is left to each individual woman to decide. Many women feel that they must give up climbing while they are pregnant, at least after a few months, for fear that they will harm the foetus. High

altitude climbing, while pregnant, is clearly out of the question for the majority of women climbers. Though the issue of pregnancy and mountaineering is, at one level, an individual choice, it is often accompanied by a fear of disapproval. However, there are women who do not allow pregnancy to deter their climbing ambitions. Alison Hargreaves' pregnancy did not slow her down; she climbed the Eiger three and a half months before giving birth. She wrote to her husband while on the trip: 'Sorry I haven't yet rung JB - wanted to ring you when I've something more of interest to tell you! I hope our sprog is OK, I'm trying to look after it' (cited in Rose, 2000:134). Despite her completing the climb Rose speculates on an interesting side to the story: 'She could remember too clearly those cramped nights with her child kicking against her as she struggled to sleep. Deep down she knew it had not been sensible' (Rose and Douglas, 2000:137). From Rose and Douglas's, and Hargreaves', comments on her experience on the Eiger, pregnancy could be seen as a constraint on climbing for Hargreaves.

To consider this issue further in a historical context, Janet Adam Smith was a contemporary of Nea Morin; both were climbing significant routes in the 1920s in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. However, Smith chose to tackle her role of mother less candidly than Morin. In *Mountain Holidays* she only once blatantly refers to herself as a mother. She writes of her first climbing experience after having her child, 'I led Michael up the north-west buttress of Sgurr Sgumain, a delightful climb on the best of rock, enhanced by my relief at discovering that, apparently, being a mother didn't spoil one's balance' (Smith, 1946:170). That is it, nothing more is said of the matter. The reader does not even know if she had a boy or a girl; and must scan two pages back to see even the possible year of birth.

With the onset of World War II, climbing ceased to be a pastime sought out by both sexes. The war would alter many mountaineers' perspectives on climbing indelibly. Many famed climbers would not find themselves in the Alps or Chamonix for a casual day of climbing for years. Some, such as Nea Morin's husband, Jean, would never return home from the war, causing a great impact on the entire mountaineering community. After the death of her husband, Morin chose to alter her climbing altogether. She no longer was an advocate of *cordee feminine* but now called for *en cordee famille*, family

rope climbing (Williams, 1973:140). The post war days also brought a new definition of the role of woman and mother. The sight of women in the workplace was becoming increasingly commonplace. It was 'acceptable for a woman to work before and in the early stages of marriage, but (not) to return to the labour market while her children were still of school age and thus dependent upon the parents' (Pugh, 1992:289). This balance would allow women to experience both home life and the labour market. The economy was rising and plenty of opportunities for work were available. Unfortunately, with the war over, women were finding themselves demoted while young men took their former positions, forcing women to re-evaluate women's emancipation.

The decision whether to have children, or not, was altered with the end of the war, due to means of birth control being socially accepted. Many women no longer faced a life of pregnancies but, instead, a few planned years (though not all women had access to birth control.) However, this did not mean that the expectations of motherhood had changed. Society still clung to the notion that women were to be nurturers and carers above anything else and were not to take unnecessary risks.

Gwen Moffat was an Army driver and dispatch rider during World War II. But in 1945 she deserted the army and went into hiding, rock climbing in Wales and Cornwall. Due to her desertion, Moffat is associated with a rebellious nature by the climbing community; a rebellion that would carry over into her views of parenting. When Moffat joined the Pinnacle Club¹ for their Easter Meet in 1947, she was pregnant. Ada Shaw, later to join the club also, writes of the recollection: 'I well remember Gwen Moffat - no one realized she was pregnant straight away' (Angell: 1988: 81). Climbing while pregnant would have been seen as rebellious in the late 1940's. Women may have held some new freedoms in society post-World War II but the negativity towards women who were mothers on mountains was still ubiquitous. One reason given was that a woman was not expected to climb whilst pregnant for no one knew the extent of the damage the foetus could incur due to the strain.

Gwen Moffat climbed one week after giving birth to her daughter Sheena. Moffat was aware of the quizzical glares she received walking about with ropes and baby, but chose to ignore them. She wrote in *Space Below My Feet* of her experience:

'I attracted some attention on the road and still more in Llanrwst where we were waiting for a bus and Sheena grew so hungry that I had to turn aside to a convenient surgery and feed her in the doctor's waiting room. I was wearing climbing gear and carrying the rope.' (Moffat, 1961:82)

Moffat has an incredible ability to break through social expectations of a woman of her time, demonstrated here by her being fully aware of the stigma attached to mothers who climb mountains and still choosing to climb anyway. Picture Moffat draped in climbing gear feeding her young baby in a waiting room. Picture then the faces of those in the waiting room and on the streets. The phrasing in which she describes this first climbing excursion is significant. She writes that she 'attracted some attention.' She doesn't state whether it was positive or negative but the reaction can be imagined.

Despite the negativity surrounding women who were mothers on mountains, Moffat chose to not only continue climbing but also write about her experiences as a mountaineering mother. Moffat's constraints are exaggerated further when she chooses to become a guide and has to place Sheena in a boarding school. She writes of her dismay:

'That evening I sat in the empty kitchen and was tortured by doubts. I fancied that I had abandoned Sheena and Mais non! who loved me and were dependent on me. I had given up our home and security in exchange for a life that would be infinitely precarious and, perhaps, even dangerous' (Moffat, 1961:127).

Moffat admits in this passage that, despite her rebellious nature, she found it difficult to pursue mountaineering over motherhood. In the passage Moffat hints at the potential possibility of her own death by stating that a life of guiding could be dangerous. The danger is not for Sheena but for herself and Moffat never explicitly admits that she could die and leave Sheena without a mother. Perhaps it is fear that causes Moffat to only speculate about her own demise within the mountains. Or, maybe she could not

consciously reconcile her roles as mountaineer and mother, despite trying to seek a balance between her career as a guide and her role as a mother.

One solution to being a mother and a climber is for the children to come climbing. From the above passage, it is clear Moffat found that to be a tolerable solution, except when looking to climb the higher peaks. As mentioned earlier, Nea Morin climbed with her two children extensively, but they were actively participating in the climb and were, obviously, much older than one week. In order to get a substantial amount of climbing in with her young baby, Moffat had to be clever. She writes:

'At Idwal Geoff and Gordon went trotting gaily up the Slabs while I fumed at the bottom until a walker came along and I sent him to sit on the rock below which Sheena lay asleep, while I ran up Hope solo and joined the others on Holy Tree Wall.' (Moffat, 1961: 82)

Seen as a feminist by her contemporaries, the societal mores of Moffat's time put women, especially mothers, in the home and so Moffat's 'feminism' or indeed, strength of character allowed her, and unlike others, to realise the potential to balance the expectations of society, motherhood and mountaineering.

Moffat's example is interesting to compare to contemporary women climbers who began balancing their own expected gender roles and their desires to climb high summits. Cathy Woodhead (1997), an active climber and Pinnacle Club Member, offered sound advice to the readers of the *Pinnacle Club Journal* regarding motherhood and climbing. She firstly writes about seconding Alison's Rib at Bosigran whilst she was seven months pregnant (Woodhead, 1997-1999: 35). The rest of the article provides suggestions for mothers who still want to continue climbing after pregnancy and how to incorporate children into the climbing experience itself. She writes:

'To sum up I would suggest making time for children and time for climbing without compromise because both are important. Run family meets, join child-

friendly clubs and find areas like the Julian Alps that children can enjoy.’
(Woodhead, 1997-1999: 36)

Woodhead’s advice is sound and offers women possibilities for continuing climbing when mothers, though it assumes women will organise things and not men. However, children cannot be taken on high altitude Himalayan climbs, not further than Base Camp anyway, which makes it difficult for many women to leave their children in order to participate in long expeditions. Irene Miller was a member of the 1978 American women ascent of Annapurna I. She was the only woman on the expedition who still had children living at home. Arlene Blum writes in *Annapurna: A Woman’s Place* about Irene’s hesitation to join the expedition:

‘She had confided to me that she was extremely concerned about the dangers of Annapurna—not only the risk to herself, but the potential loss to her children. Irene was very close to her two teenage daughters’ (Blum, 1980:6).

Miller had been a member of several expeditions since her daughters were born, but most of her significant climbing had been done prior to their births. Miller did well on the expedition but was often thinking of her daughter. Whether a mountaineer is a mother or father, both have to decide whether the time away from their family is worth achieving the summit. Yet women and men make those decisions in the context of society’s different gendered expectations of them, as I have shown. Women may also have different decisions to make about the practicalities of child care and whether or not to take children on expeditions with them, if possible, given that women are still largely seen as the primary care giver.

The specific question of whether women as mothers should climb mountains cannot be separated from the complexities of gender inequality in contemporary society. Women, both in the past and in the future, have attempted and will attempt to disrupt the typical societal expectations of the female gender in order to achieve their goals of reaching the summits. I have shown that issues of gender inequality are still omnipresent

in the climbing community and come into sharp focus through a consideration of women who both climb and are mothers. There is, I would argue, no clear-cut answer as to whether parents of either sex should climb mountains, if so doing puts themselves and their families at risk. For this raises wider questions regarding the loss of human life and the reasons why both sexes climb mountains in the first place.

Note

1. The Pinnacle Club was formed in 1921. It was the second 'ladies-only' club. The Ladies' Alpine Club being the first club for women climbers. The Pinnacle Club was designed to provide a supportive climbing atmosphere for women climbers to gain the skills which would allow them to excel at climbing.

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