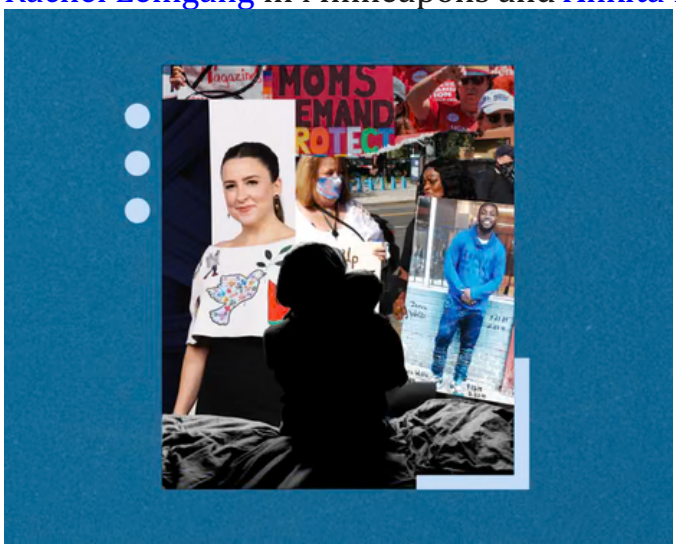
‘I see every child like I see my children’: why US mothers are on the frontlines of resistance movements

Mothers’ experiences often intersect with federal policy battles over gun violence, immigration and childcare

Rachel Leingang in Minneapolis and Ankita Rao in Washington



The current moment builds on decades of work – mothers harnessing their organizing power, meeting up with each other to keep their communities safe, launching and supporting campaigns, advocating for changes in public policy and getting out the vote. Composite: Rita Liu/The Guardian/Getty Images

Sarah spent the first months of the year following immigration agents around the Twin Cities to document arrests and violations of constitutional rights. On the day Renee Good was killed by a federal agent after dropping her son at school, she too had been surrounded by agents who screamed that they were the good guys.

On the other side of the metropolis, Linsey Rippy showed up daily to a church, ready to assemble and distribute boxes full of produce, beans, rice, cereal, sometimes adding in formula for babies stuck at home with their parents because it wasn’t safe to go out during “Operation Metro Surge”, the Trump administration’s widespread and violent immigration enforcement crackdown.

Mothers built the backbone of the resistance in Minnesota, quickly setting up networks to get kids to school and feed people, march and protest, monitor immigration agents, give rides, protect school grounds and fundraise for rent – a revolution made of caregiving and community. The movement accelerated nationally when millions saw a now iconic photo of five-year-old Liam Ramos, who was detained in the state along with his father and taken to the Dilley immigration processing center in Texas.

Rachel Accurso, the popular children’s show host and advocate known as Ms Rachel, ramped up a campaign on social media and across TV networks to end immigration detention for children. She described a video call with a nine-year-old, Deiver, a spelling bee winner who was also held

at Dilley detention center in Texas who wanted to be released so he could go to the state bee, as “devastating and surreal”.

“I see every child like I see my children and I think about their mothers having to see them suffer,” Accurso said. “It breaks me.”

Anita Patel, a pediatrician and mom based in Washington DC, joined with two other doctors who are moms to launch a campaign to end child detention, writing letters to administration officials signed by thousands of medical professionals. Liam’s photo redirected attention to the other children in detention, including a two-month-old baby. The doctors could translate medical emergencies into understandable terms; every mother could understand the danger of a child who was constipated for 10 days, she said.

“I would have never done any of this if I hadn’t been a fucking angry mother,” Patel said.

The current moment builds on decades of work – mothers harnessing their organizing power, meeting up with each other to keep their communities safe, launching and supporting campaigns, advocating for changes in public policy and getting out the vote. They push for gun restrictions because their kids have been shot or subjected to shooting drills in class. They fight against police brutality because their kids face state violence. They lobby for the climate because they want a future on a burning planet. They rally for women’s rights and constitutional rights, affordability and abortion access.

Now they’re advocating not just from the outside, but within the political parties and in public office, where they are pushing for policies and agendas that would improve parenthood in the US.

“The same network of moms who we’re relying on to raise families – the carpools and the group chats and the neighborhood meetups – they’re the same networks that … now we’re using to organize and to mobilize and to protect their communities,” said Liuba Grechen Shirley, the founder and CEO of Vote Mama, a progressive group aimed at electing more mothers to office.

Why moms?

This year, the moms on the frontlines and behind the scenes in Minnesota first led to a series of headlines, often dismissive or surprised. A Fox commentator called them “organized gangs of wine moms”. While the advocacy of Black and brown mothers, long documented in social movements, was seen as expected, the shock seemed to focus on white suburban mothers (the Fox writer called them “self-important white women”).

“We should have been listening to Black women all along,” Rippy said. “Black women have been doing the work and they’ve been walking the walk and talking the talk … So it’s our turn.”

Donald Trump’s first election had already animated women, who marched by the millions on the day he was inaugurated in 2017, partly because of his attacks on reproductive rights and track record of misogyny. “The second he got elected, he radicalized a bunch of moms,” Patel said.

“And I call myself radicalized in the sense that if I have to run for office to stop these people, I will.”

But even before the president was elected for the first time, there was a long, global history of women and mothers in mass social and political movements – and their role has been tied to the movement’s success.

Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, both Harvard researchers, analyzed decades of mass resistance campaigns worldwide, finding that women’s participation on the frontlines was “highly correlated” with success and keeping the movement nonviolent and more likely to lead to egalitarian democracy.

“In other words, fully free, politically active women are a threat to authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning leaders – and so those leaders have a strategic reason to be sexist,” Chenoweth and Marks wrote in 2022.

This extends to mothers, whose personal experiences often intersect with the policy battles playing out at the federal level. Becoming a mother, especially in a country with no national standard of paid family leave, inadequate access to healthcare, rising childcare costs with waitlists for care, and higher maternal mortality than other developed countries (and higher still for Black women), has driven many to look at the systems that make their lives so difficult.

“By the time you realize just how terrible our policies are, you’re usually trying to survive motherhood,” Grechen Shirley said.

Sarah, the St Paul mom who has been part of rapid response efforts, said giving birth heightened her strengths and weaknesses. It held up a mirror, and she had the choice to evolve or stay stagnant.

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Busy moms are accustomed to juggling work with parenting and extracurriculars. The moms the Guardian spoke to said the time equation is constant, but there is a sense that if they don’t step up, no one else will. “I feel like we just are kind of conditioned to do extra,” Sarah said. “Is that a good thing? No. Is the burnout real? Yes.”

That is also why the movement-building they do, and the organizations they found, tend to be less hierarchical, more focused on collaboration than credit.

The advocacy, inevitably, has come with pushback. Accurso, who has also spoken out about the fate of Palestinian children in Gaza, faces threats and calls for investigations, particularly from pro-Israel groups. She said her sister helped her reframe: she should focus on those experiencing injustice, not people who criticize her for using her voice. She also prayed about it, feeling the message that she is here to help children, not to be liked by all.

“I continue to speak out because the kids are counting on us,” she said. “I continue because I would want people to speak out if it were my kids. It’s my calling to care about all children. It’s just who I am and I can’t not care.”

Even with that backlash, Shannon Watts, who first started the nationwide group Moms Demand Action to respond to gun violence, teamed up with Katie Paris, who created a group called Red Wine and Blue that seeks to engage suburban women and elect more women to office. Together the pair have found success in leaning into what others might call a trope: by the time Watts joined, the organization already had 800 local groups and about 650,000 members.

Shannon Watts, founder of Moms Demand Action, left, and Senator Chris Murphy, center, join activists and other Democrats to demand action on gun control in Washington, 26 May 2022. Photograph: J Scott Applewhite/AP

The idea came to Paris as she traveled around her home state of Ohio, meeting with women in their living rooms and watching the organizing they did in their communities.

“Most of the names of these things all sound like ‘American women for America of America’, and you can’t tell the difference between them,” Paris said. “They don’t sound like much fun. And the reality of it is like women were getting together, having a damn good time.”

Resistance leads to political power

While both Watts and Paris believe a lot of work can happen on the outside of the political system, they also want more women to run for office. While many who got involved with local organizing groups are intimidated by the electoral system, Watts said. When you’re up close with the mostly male, white lawmakers, “you realize, unfortunately, too many of them are not rocket scientists,” she added.

Watts’s group, Moms Demand Action, has helped launch political runs, including those of Virginia governor Abigail Spanberger and Annie Andrews, a pediatrician running against Lindsey Graham in South Carolina.

There's a long way to representation. Moms of children under 18 make up 18% of the population, but only just more than 7% of Congress, according to the Vote Mama Foundation, compared with the dads who comprise 23% of Congress, compared with 15% of the US population. (Men named John or Jon, meanwhile, make up 10% of the US Senate.)

Jody Barnwell Smith was once satisfied with her life as a nurse, helping people at their bedside day after day. But when a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school claimed 17 lives, the Tennessee resident said nursing was no longer enough.

"We're the busiest, but we're also the most effective. It's who I think of when I need XYZ done, and I need to get it done quickly"
Jody Barnwell Smith on mothers

She needed to do more, which led her first to Moms Demand Action, and then to Cordell Hull, where the state legislature meets. In time, she was co-leading her local group, knocking on doors around election day, and eventually becoming the vice-chair of the Williamson county Democratic party, where she recruits candidates to challenge the Republican incumbents that surround her in deep-red rural Tennessee.

When she looks around to see who is helping and who should run, she said she primarily sees other mothers. Smith pointed out that in the last election cycle, the four people running for the state legislature for Williamson county were mothers.

"We're the busiest, but we're also the most effective," she said. "It's who I think of when I need XYZ done, and I need to get it done quickly. 99% of the time it's always another mom who I ended up talking to."

While Tennessee remains roundly Republican, she credits these efforts to a slow shift to the left – even the losses, she said, like progressive Aftyn Behn's recent loss for a congressional seat in recent months, show significant gains in Democratic support. But Smith has no illusions that she is only surrounded by like-minded people.

She said the Covid pandemic, specifically, led to entrenched political views in parent and school organizations around her, and that many of her neighbors have continued to follow rightwing messaging that started with protesting mask mandates and has now morphed into anti-vaccination campaigns.

"The moms in one way or another carry a lot of influence," she said.

Policies not just politics

When more moms run for and hold office, policies change, too.

Grechen Shirley, of Vote Mama, ran for Congress in New York in 2018 because she was a "pissed-off mom", when her kids were ages one and three. She petitioned the Federal Election Commission to use campaign funds to cover childcare costs, which the commission approved.

Vote Mama has since advocated for states to pass laws to allow the same, and half of states now have documented use of campaign funds for childcare. The group has also pushed for more states to allow campaign funds for security, a sign of the increased threats facing women and people of color when they run for office.

Grechen Shirley said she quickly saw how the system wasn't designed for moms or caregivers. She often faced questions about who would watch her kids. Whenever she talked about paid family leave or childcare, someone would say she should ignore "women's issues".

"I wanted to normalize what it looks like to run and serve as a mom, so that the first question you're asked is not: 'But who will watch your kids while you campaign?', but: 'Why are you running, and how can I help?'" she said.

Back in Minnesota, state senator Clare Oumou Verbeten had a baby while serving as an elected official – and quickly went to work changing her workplace for mothers.

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She had been dealing with illnesses and disruptions to childcare that often accompany a baby's first year. She had to bring her baby, Leo, at the time about seven months old, with her to the state senate, but he was kicked outwhen she brought him to the senate floor because it violated chamber rules. The state house, on the other hand, allowed kids on the floor.

A bipartisan group of moms came together and decided to push for a rule change, deciding "we're not going to watch another person go through this again", Oumou Verbeten said. Julia Coleman, a key Republican lawmaker who supported the effort, shared how she was unable to breastfeed her premature twins because of the lack of accommodations in the senate. They succeeded, overturning the 168-year-old ban on children on the senate floor.

Now Oumou Verbeten is on to her next mission. She has shared how her birth experience showed her first-hand how Black women are often not heard by medical professionals, leading to adverse outcomes. She is pushing legislation for insurance to cover doula services to help address the maternal health gap. Whether making laws, or making sure the state abides by them, moms leading social movements have increasingly become the face of American resistance. But in the end, Accurso said, the current political atmosphere calls for everyone to find their role in protecting the next generation.

"Kids don't belong in detention. They belong in schools and on playgrounds. That's not a controversial statement," she said. "We should not be afraid to say that. What should frighten us is our silence, and what that silence is allowing to continue – children being abused, neglected and traumatized.

"One of our most sacred responsibilities is to care for the children of the world. We should be ashamed that we are failing our babies."

This article was amended on 10 May 2026 to clarify that Katie Paris was the founder Red Wine and Blue.

The authors, both mothers of young children, reported and wrote this story as they managed daycare illnesses, birthday parties, caregiving responsibilities and school lotteries. Another editor on their team went into labor the day the story was finished.

Rachel Leingang *in Minneapolis and* **Ankita Rao** *in Washington*
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