

## Motherwork and Intensive Caring in Pandemic Times

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Feminist scholars and commentators have stressed how the COVID-19 pandemic exposes a 'crisis of care'; the often invisible, unwaged or underpaid carework and social reproductive labour, that always has upheld our societies, especially that in the public sphere, is now taking centre stage. At the frontlines are not soldiers, but essential careworkers – ranging from the cleaners, supermarket cashiers and ambulance drivers to the protective-uniform-clad carers, nurses, and medical specialists at the intensive care units. It also applies to the workers (such as cooks, cleaners and nurses) in the less-equipped care homes for the elderly and disabled where in the Global North increasing fatalities are being registered. For those in complete lockdown and confined to the private sphere, the impact of this crisis is also revealing immense challenges in terms of not only economic, but also social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing. Depending on one's locality and position in society, these 'home' conditions might range from overcrowded spaces where social distancing is unattainable (e.g., slums and refugee centres or camps) to the isolation and vulnerability of persons who might have to spend a quarantine completely alone. Home dwellers and families, that come in various constellations, have also been thrust into shared living space on a 24/24 basis, which – unsurprisingly – has led to a rise in the already staggering numbers on domestic violence and child abuse worldwide.

What about the effect of lockdown on carework at home, especially among parents and other caregivers of children, seeing that schools, day-care and the parenting work performed by many grandparents (especially grandmothers) – who are at additional health risk – has similarly 'shut down'? Parenting, of course, can be performed by many persons, who not necessarily have biological paternity or maternity. Yet motherhood scholars have emphasized how historically, and even in societies that today have come a long way in terms of gender equality and fairer divisions of labour, 'mothers' proportionally still carry the brunt of most parenting and household work, including those in paid employment. The image of the stay-at-home mom materially dependent on a working husband-the-provider, was only ever a reality for very few. Beyond certain privileged minorities, women (and many children still today), including mothers, have always 'worked', contributing to the material needs for survival and family income. As the saying goes, 'it takes a village to raise a child'; mothers (and fathers) have additionally also always been supported by othermothers or alloparents, and were rarely sole responsible for childcare (see e.g., Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother and Others*, 2009)

Scholars in what has become known as the field of 'Motherhood studies' have contributed to the theorization of 'mothering' – referring to persons with mothering roles independent of biological affinity or gender – as itself a form of labour, which involves modalities of care, affect, values, 'rational' thought and complex skills (O'Reilly 2016). Sara Ruddick, in her monumental *Maternal Thinking* (1989) delineated three kinds of demands upon mothers, in raising children: the act of physical preservation, nurturance for emotional and intellectual growth, and training for social acceptance. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1994) coined the term 'motherwork' in critique of the way studies of motherhood were often limited to the experiences of predominantly white middle class

nuclear families. In contrast, (speaking of the US) for mothers of colour, she argued, motherwork also involves cultivating social survival skills by strengthening the child's cultural identity in the face of structural racism. In research by colleagues and myself on motherhood at the [Centre for Research on Culture and Gender](#), we similarly show how diverse forms of parenting and motherwork can be seen as practices of social and affective citizenship that extend far beyond the material, personal and private sphere (see the reference list below).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its regulations on social distancing and lockdown, without precedent, has put many parents and carers in a position where it is structurally impossible to share or outsource parenting, motherwork, and even education. Many now have to combine fulltime carework with paid labour, in the shared singular space of the domestic home. This 'combining' is not even performed sequentially, but involves simultaneous multiple shifts of waged work, with housework, childcare, home-schooling, etc. As Canadian motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2020) in a [recent interview](#) states, motherwork was already invisibilized labour, including the 'third shift' of emotional labour, or what others also refer to as the 'mental load' of running a household and managing family members' schedules and needs: "Under a pandemic microenvironment, we can expect to see the pressures rise exponentially with added work, stress and anxiety." This in societies where many parents, and mothers especially, have already been among the most challenged and burnt out in trying to achieve – in HR jargon – a 'work-life balance', facing a '[maternal wall](#)' blocking equal opportunities, fair wages and career advancement. When business was as usual, mothers in precarious positions (e.g. low-income, lone and migrant mothers) were also already struggling with the impossible demands to be economically productive in an increasingly de-regularised labour market, while shouldering reproductive labour at home. In lockdown, in the best case, schooling has continued in some form of improvised remote learning which has been experienced as overwhelming both parents and kids. Yet prior inequalities in the classroom, it has been noted, will also likely be aggravated among those schoolchildren from the most underprivileged groups in society, having limited or no access to computers, or even hot meals, and other resources and parental assistance to support and sustain them.

Much psychological and pedagogical 'expert' advice circulating in mainstream and social media, only adds to the burden upon parents and caregivers by promoting what Sharon Hays (1989) called the neo-liberal middle-class ideology of 'intensive mothering' that has dominated parenting discourses in the past two decades. Not only should parents provide the best opportunities, emotionally stimulating and intellectually educating and entertaining our children from birth. We should now also be able to combine that with fulltime jobs (for those who still have jobs and are tele-commuting) during a global pandemic too: make sure children don't fatally fall behind on their curriculum; give sufficient 'structure' by mimicking school schedules including nutritious snack breaks; provide sufficient 'homework' versus 'playtime' assignments; and of course, also keep up – assisted by digital technologies (yet make sure to limit screen time!) – with their friendships, hobbies, exercise, and throw in some online art classes and kid's yoga too. Parents are also held accountable for disciplining their children – overnight – into autonomous subjects in the background, who will not 'interrupt' while they meet deadlines, customers' and bosses' demands. Zoom includes a blurring feature to hide your personal 'mess' you know, so really, there is also no excuse out of that online meeting, interview, lecture or oral exam.

If carework in the public sector will require serious restructuring in exit and post pandemic times; one can only wonder what the impact might be on parents who work – as most – must – do. Going towards the summer, with the increasing likelihood of vacations, trips yet also summer camps and summer day-care cancellations, working parents might be looking at another two months with their kids at home. If lockdowns recur in the long term, the challenges for organizing and continuously re-organizing education, work and carework will be huge. Furthermore, certain regions that have been hit worst by the pandemic, like in the North of Italy, have lost a generation of elders in a country where the role of grandparents in childcare is crucial, and with that, an infrastructure of informal yet crucial othermothering and alloparenting is weakened. Virologists have already warned, that due to the high risk of infection, for years to come, among others, grandparents cannot be counted on anymore to take care of sick children. What can this pandemic teach us for devising new ways of organizing and experiencing more realistic, equitable, valued and more meaningful ‘work’ in the future? In any case, and as has been emphasized by feminist theorists many times before, it will have to start with acknowledging the carework that always was, and now is even more intensively being performed, whether among the – often underpaid and overworked – ‘heroes’

## References

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