

The Meaning of Motherhood for Spanish Women

Its Affect on Entering or Re-entering the Labour Force

This paper analyzes the meaning of motherhood for a group of Spanish women who wish to enter, or re-enter, the labour force. Their lives have been focused on motherhood and family to which they now add training and employment. I will explore how these women perceive motherhood, what it has meant for them to be mothers, and the degree to which motherhood is valued as compared to their professional development. In this study, I use a qualitative methodology that is focused on the subjective meaning of motherhood. Information has been gathered from discussion groups, life stories, and notes. The results obtained show that Spanish women see motherhood as both desirable and oppressive. Also, the way in which these women ascribe value to motherhood in the current context is different compared to their perception of motherhood in previous life stages. For women in my study, motherhood is a relevant event that has marked their lives and that affects their return to the labour market.

This article analyzes how a group of women from the South of Spain describe and characterize maternity from their own experiences as mothers. The purpose of the study presented here was to analyze the career transition process of a group of adult women who wished to enter, or re-enter, the labour force. These women, from the Province of Seville (Andalusia, Spain), had little work-related experience (even the few who had worked outside the home before they became mothers) beyond what they perform in their traditional roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper, but nevertheless hoped to access paid employment. The average age of the participants was 40 years old; all had children, most were married, and for the most part dedicated to their family. The results of this study demonstrate that motherhood was one of the most relevant life experiences emphasized by the women in terms of their life trajectories from a personal, formative and professional level.

It is within this context that we developed the three questions that are at the root of this study: How did the women perceived motherhood? What has being a mother meant to them? And how do they currently feel about motherhood in relation to their professional development and wishes to enter the labour force?

The reality of Spaniard women: Yesterday and today

Thirty to 40 years ago, the social, political, and economic reality of Spanish women was very different from today. It was a time when women's possibilities for personal development were limited to a great extent. Spain was a country whipped by a dictatorship, where a unique discriminatory, patriarchal social structure prevailed. The clear division of sexual roles, according to Abad Terrón (2001) and Balbiano (2005) had consequences in all spheres of life that was above and beyond the context of repression and general deprivation that existed for both women and men at the time. The repercussions of this model were more pronounced in the countryside as opposed to the city, because there were, not surprisingly, fewer opportunities for professional development, in particular for women (Campo et al., 2001).

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Spanish women's lives have centered on their traditional roles as wife, mother, and housekeeper. These roles have prevailed in a patriarchal system that configures a restricted female role in society:

The Spanish woman's stereotype by the end of the nineteenth century fits within the traditional pattern of an ideal woman, whose primal role in life is being a submissive wife and perfect mother, exclusively dedicated to domestic chores. (Nasch, 1983: 40)

In the decades of 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, marriage was considered as a crucial flexion point for women. It was believed that the choice of a partner for us [women] (not for men) was the definitive step in the resolution of our identity. (Dowling, 1996: 43)

Women were, therefore, expected to be mothers, wives, and caregivers for the entire family, as well as be responsible for secondary tasks related mostly to agriculture and associated to the husband's work. According to Caballero (2004), from an egalitarian perspective, women's possibilities for choice were denied, suppressed, or, at the very least, diminished by the prevailing patriarchal system, and this had a profound influence on female values and lifestyles and on the perceptions that women had about their lives.

As pointed out by Larumbe (2004), "The expectations of Spanish women, until the end of the seventies, were exclusively oriented towards marriage" (22). Furthermore, the nineteenth century had inherited the myth-concept of an ideal or "good" mother (wife-mother), which according to Sáez Buenaventura

(1999) was more strongly present among working-class women and contributed to the social “enclosure” of women within family and maternal issues.

In this context, women’s lives were conditioned by the few educational possibilities offered to them and by the fact that they started to work inside, and sometimes outside, the home at a very early age. Motherhood was thus *the* most important role that defined a woman’s identity. Indeed, it was “the centrality of the female being” (Ortega López, 1996: 46). Women did not have many opportunities outside marriage and there was strong social pressure for women to marry. By the end of the 1960s, women’s most significant role continued to be reproductive and marked by a biological imperative in their life trajectory. However, “reproduction was only thought within a legally constituted family, where marriage as an ‘indissoluble bond’ and reproduction were tightly related” (Larumbe, 2004: 30).

In the beginning of the twentieth century, motherhood remained socially mandated for women. In terms of gendered socialization, women continued to be defined by their reproductive function and role as mothers, which were considered the most important aspects of their life project. In this sense, motherhood became a “social tax” for women.

In Spain, women’s cultural representation is still the housewife—the “queen” of the house and mother. Motherhood remains the foundation of a female identity. Pro-natalist policies are promoted to defend breastfeeding and prohibit abortion. A social conception of marriage as an indissoluble bond between husband and wife is part and parcel of women’s socialization, as well as an emphasis on importance of the family as a space where these values are reproduced. These social values are so deeply rooted that it is unthinkable in Spain to imagine a woman not associated with a man—her husband—around whom she builds her life. The influence of society, education, family, and even the mass media—particularly when television started entering homes—promotes the socialization of women around these traditional values, seen as “inherent” to women’s gender role.

The United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development, and Peace (1976-1985) was a remarkable event that impacted on the situation of women in Spain. New educational and labour opportunities became possible, presenting lifestyle alternatives, new models of society that had never been considered before. From this moment onward, women’s status became a social priority.

Between the 1970s and the beginning of the first decade in the 1980s, the proportion of never married people increased while the proportion of married people diminished, a trend particularly visible among women between the ages of twenty and twenty-four years.... The proportion of married women reached its highest point in the age group between twenty-five and forty four years old. (Naciones Unidas, 1991: 14-15)

The introduction of the birth control pill in Spain gave women new opportunities, not the least of which was the choice of whether or not to become mothers. “Between 1970 and 1990, pregnancy rates diminished on an average of 2.6 to 1.8 births by woman in developed regions and from a 5-to-7 scale to a 3-to-6 scale in developing regions” (Naciones Unidas, 1991: 60). However, cultural transformation in rural areas took place more slowly (Carrasco Tristancho and Cubillo, 2004). In rural areas, birth rates are higher and women continue planning their lives around their families. There are fewer educational opportunities in small towns, as well as firmly rooted conceptions about women’s place in society that continue to create barriers to women’s access to equality and freedom from traditional gender roles.

Today, in Spain, feminist thought about mothering/motherhood has proliferated, and is interpreted by diverse theories—that also criticize androcentric and patriarchal systems—as a social “tax” for women (Jeremiah, 2006). On the other hand, there are those who also theorize motherhood as a positive and genuinely “female” landmark (O’Reilly, 2004). Both perspectives are valid and complementary when motherhood is a choice, freed from the constraints of traditional, patriarchal norms. It is in this context that we wanted specifically to explore the social meaning of motherhood for the participants in our study, and to determine to what extent becoming a mother was a choice they made freely, as well as how their maternal role was combined with other aspects of their lives.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology that is based on the women’s perspective of themselves and the way they perceived and experienced our research process (Taylor and Bodgan, 1986). We specifically placed ourselves within this biographical-narrative study (Fraser, 1970; Bertaux, 1980; Stewart, 1994; Lecoçç, 1995) with its emphasis on the experiential, reflexive knowledge, subjective meaning, and voice of the participants, and how these dimensions interact upon and within the participants’ personal stories and the contexts of their lives (Curtis, 1978; Arnaus, 1995).

The participants

The sample was intentional and took into consideration certain factors. Overall, a total of 40 women participated, although their involvement varied according to each phase of research. In the first phase all the women were involved; in the second phase eight were selected based on the information we obtained in the first phase.

Our starting point was the European context (see Figure 1), focusing on Spain and the Autonomous Region of Andalusia in particular. Our research was carried out in the Province of Seville, in the western part of Spain, which is divided in diverse regions or geographical areas. The women who participated in this research are from four of the regions: Alanis de la Sierra (Sierra Norte),

Osuna (Countryside), Castilleja de la Cuesta (Metropolitan Area-Aljarafe), and Espartinas (Aljarafe). Six were women from Alanís; twelve women from Osuna; and eleven women from Castilleja de la Cuesta and Espartinas, respectively.

Figure 1: The life context of women



Data-gathering techniques

As data-gathering techniques we used focus groups, exploratory interviews, life-stories, and field notes. Specifically, four focus group sessions were carried out, one for each context; 40 exploratory interviews, one with each woman participating in this research; and eight life stories, with two cases selected in

each context. Some social indicators were also used, such as the predominant activity in the regions, unemployment and growth rates, and educational facilities to obtain information from each of these areas.

The questions asked were: What does motherhood mean to you? How did you experience motherhood? And how do you perceive motherhood in mid-life, with specific regard to professional prospects?

Techniques for the analysis of information

Taking into consideration characteristics of the data obtained (Gil Flores, 1994), data were analyzed using the common procedures for qualitative analysis with methodological support from the NUD.IST Program. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), the central tasks were: data-gathering, transcription, codification and categorization of data, disposal, organization and interpretation of data, previous codification and developing a hierarchical system of categories, recording conclusions. Triangulation was used as a technique of methodological integration.

Results

The women experienced motherhood in both positive and negative ways. Their first impressions and memories were linked to the moment they learned of their pregnancy, how it happened, and whether the circumstances surrounding their lives were perceived as oppressive..

The women had their first child between 1970-1990. Some of the women found childbirth to be a very positive experience, ranking it as the most important thing that they have accomplished in their lives. However, they also spoke about the increase in domestic work as a result. As women are primarily responsible for domestic work in the home, the women emphasized the fact that having a child did not affect their partner's life equally. On the other hand, sons and daughters filled some of the emptiness in the lives of these women during difficult times in which they felt alone.

It's the best thing that happened to me in my whole life. I wouldn't change it for any other experience. (Carmen)

The truth is my children were wanted and that's good, but they also gave me sleepless nights, they were very weepy, hyperactive ... however, the birth, pregnancy and all that, in addition to all the changes they [the children] have gone through, of course they are what I love most, but your life changes, of course! ... I've had all the normal problems any mother has, for example you need some little rest but, well, to tell the truth, it was a very important stage [of my life]. (Ana)

Other women recalled negative experiences of motherhood. These women gave birth to their children at a very young age, at a moment when they had not

begun to think about becoming mothers. Getting pregnant thus forced these women to make significant life decisions such as getting married, dropping out of school, or quitting work. These women were forced to give up on the already limited educational and professional opportunities in order to care for their new families. This influenced the way they valued motherhood at that moment they became mothers.

In the beginning it's very hard because motherhood is something that changes your life. It's something that you don't think about and you suddenly face. It's not that I didn't think of having a baby, although I didn't know how to do it either, but I thought if I fell— Many things crossed my mind at that time. (Rosa)

In general, the women had a positive experience of motherhood, calling it an important landmark in their lives that they prioritized before anything else. The role of paid worker is secondary at this stage, although many of the women continued to work sporadically outside the home, mainly in the underground economy and only part-time. While a number of women dropped out of the public school system during this time, others continued their studies or pursued complementary training activities. Nevertheless, motherhood had a significant influence on the lives of these women, interrupting for the most part any attempts at a professional life, or job advancement.

For those women who initially experienced motherhood as oppressive, mothering their sons or daughters left a mark on them and later made them question their decisions. If they had had the choice, many said, things would have been different: they would not have gotten married and/or they would have continued studying and working.

Getting pregnant, having to quit school so soon ... it's like ... one thing leads to another, right? I was working before, but only to cover my own expenses, and while I was studying. I didn't need it though, so sometimes I studied and sometimes I worked. I was living with my family and I was like a girl. But all of a sudden you have a little boy and a husband with whom you don't get along. Then you have to separate and you are on your own and you have to provide for your family and for yourself, all on your own. (Rosa)

While conceptions of motherhood varied, all the participants spoke about an idealized motherhood as opposed to the reality of mothering and what this entailed. They believed that working outside the home would have a negative impact on their sons/daughters' education and care and that no one could be as good as they were in caring for their children. In this sense, the women demonstrated some feelings of inadequacy and conflict between their personal lives and their work lives. "Good" and "bad" mother stereotypes, as

well as feelings of guilt surfaced when the possibility of paid employment came up, mostly because they would then not be able to take care of their sons and daughters during the day.

Yes, because the children realize that, when I first went to work at the factory, they stayed with my mother, so I had to take them out of their house and out of their bed.... The first month they were rebellious, and when they came from school they blamed me because I was not there.... It was a way of reproaching me because I was working and they also asked why I had to work. (Ana's life)

Women's training and work opportunities were restricted because of their mothering responsibilities. Some women chose to take distance education courses, which could be difficult as finding time to study in the home was a challenge. Others emphasized the fact that training opportunities were usually far from their homes, and in order to take advantage of available programs they had to commute to other towns or to the capital.

I left the factory because I was ashamed of going to work while I was pregnant. I didn't have the courage to look my co-workers in the face, because I feared they would be judgmental. (Milagros)

I didn't do anything because I already had my son. I almost did a course, the admission to university by correspondence, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to do anything by correspondence. (Aurora)

When the participants spoke of training and labour market access, issues related to their responsibilities as mothers raised. The work, the training and the life of these women are conditioned by motherhood.

I'd like to work, but ... only a few hours, not all day! For example, when the children go to school.

[When they are] at school ... of course, those five hours.

Then you don't have the obligation to leave them with anyone and you don't have to pay someone so the children are taken care of. (Aljarafe's focus group)

The women also spoke of depending on their mothers and mothers-in-law to take care of their children when they had to study, work or look for a job. In this sense, traditional gender roles were highlighted, as the responsibility for, and care of, the children fell to other women in the participants' lives. They all felt that raising children did not have the same impact on the lives of their

partners. The women were thus supported only by other women from their inner circle, allowing them temporarily to take on other roles.

[I got a job] with my mother's support, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to make it! If the children had not been in good care.... I'm not the kind of person who leaves their children to go to work, right? The children come first and work comes second for me, of course! This was a good option as they no longer depended as much on me, and I took it because I didn't have to leave them with a stranger.... Of course, if I'd had to leave them with a stranger or to neglect them, I tell you, I wouldn't have worked at all. (Ana)

The women in this study also expressed the need, besides their familial support networks, for public/government aid to help their families. They spoke about how they had to weigh whether it was worth it or not to go out to work and to pay someone else to take care of their children during that time. It was clear that they felt motherhood is a responsibility that only women bear, never suggesting that getting their partners involved in childrearing was an option. It is also important to note that they did not see working outside the home as contributing to their personal development, but rather as a way to contribute to the family's income, as well as the need for the development of town resources.

If you pay [a babysitter] half of the money that you make ... then it's better to stay home and take care of your children by yourself and they will be better off.... [Better to stay] home instead of going to the olive groves and have to pay someone else.

The City Council should offer a dining room or a playground or something like that so the children can go there after school and be taken care of.

... And not have to pay for the days that you are going to work, 20 or 30 days [a month].

[The City Council should offer] something not so expensive, more affordable. (Sierra Norte's focus group)

From the point of view of their professional development, motherhood was seen as an important responsibility and also as a "burden." The way in which motherhood was experienced by these women created a barrier to their opportunities for training and skill development, as well as their participation in the labour force. In terms of their re-entry into the labour market, the main barrier they identified was the availability of affordable childcare. They also pointed to other difficulties such as having to commute to other, further places, as well as discriminatory practices during the hiring process.

When I tell them that I have two children they make all kinds of excuses, of course, because when you have two children ... they wonder if I'll be able to do a good job.

Well, [even] when you don't have any children it's the same thing, because I was told that I could get pregnant anytime. (Aljarafe-Metropolitan area's focus group)

Conclusions

Concerning the most relevant conclusions of our study, motherhood is a crucial event in these women's life trajectories. It is considered something that leaves a mark "for the rest of your life." Although there are a diverse number of experiences of motherhood, all the women agreed that it was a unique life experience that they would not exchange for any other.

The women perceive motherhood as a positive and oppressive experience at the same time (O'Reilly, 2004). The responsibilities associated to motherhood are seen as an obstacle to their ability to participate in the work force or pursue educational opportunities. They identified a gender barrier, as motherhood, associated with ethics of care, is seen as "women's work." In this sense, the importance the participants gave to the support of other women, especially their mothers and mothers-in-law, is clear. They all emphasized the need for the development of support systems at the municipal level, funded by municipal resources to meet women's needs for childcare in order to provide them with the opportunity to take paid employment. Nevertheless, they also saw as important the need to engage in a dialogue about motherhood, to articulate how motherhood is experienced by women, and what a shared responsibility for childrearing means to a couple. The women we interviewed wished to enter or re-enter the labour market after they became mothers, and believed that a transformation in societal attitudes is crucial to enable women to pursue careers without fear of reproach, judgement, or feelings of guilt (Miller, 2005).

Motherhood has not only created barriers to women's continuing education, or opportunities for skills development and training, but has also impacted on the ways in which they enter or re-enter the labour market. Motherhood also influenced some of the women's life choices, as many were induced into marriage as a result of an early pregnancy. The contradictions present in the women's discourses on motherhood indicate that they constructed their lives with contradictory messages about the value of a traditional model of motherhood within a patriarchal system, and their desire to think freely and to make different professional and career choices in their life trajectories.

In this sense, motherhood for these women is associated with stereotypes that are rooted in a differential socialization process based on gender. These women thus oriented and based their lives around the traditional roles accorded them in a patriarchal society. We raised the following question: To what extent were their life choices conscious ones, or simply a response to the social condi-

tioning they experienced around women's role in a specific historical moment, the second-half of the nineteenth century?

Taking into consideration the studies by Caballero (2004) and Larrumbe (2004), motherhood for these women was "what it ought to be," something imposed on them by society, and that is based on their biology, and therefore touted as their "natural" purpose in life. The women's life decisions and their conceptions of motherhood were thus conditioned by gender stereotypes, and they continued to be influenced by a gendered division of labour that prioritizes mothering and motherhood above professional advancement and the pursuit of satisfying careers and/or work lives.

The fact that these women stressed the importance of paid work as opposed to other roles is, in our opinion, a testament to younger generations of women and the progress they have made with respect to their traditional societal roles. Their desire to pursue a career and re-enter the labour force clearly reflects a generational change in women's life expectations to which female perceptions of motherhood are linked. This can be seen as the result of a greater social awareness, as well as the development of equal opportunity policies and training and labour insertion activities that focus on underprivileged or disadvantaged groups (Astelarra, 2005).

These achievements are visible in the work of Padilla Carmona, García Gómez and Suárez Ortega (2005), where girls who completed compulsory schooling insisted on work as a life choice prior to family. Marriage and children are thus not seen as priorities. This is agreeable with their mother's expectations, which prioritize the need for autonomy before living together with their boyfriends and starting a family. Therefore, we can see some advancement in the status of younger generations of women that are the product of the generation of women we interviewed in this study, who highlighted the centrality of paid work and successful careers for adult women. In Spain, women continue to take on the role of the central pillar of the household, a role that is very much internalized. However, they currently also expect to access employment and training without giving up their roles as wives and mothers. Nevertheless, when they choose to work outside the home, they continue to be responsible for the tasks associated with their traditional roles, and these responsibilities are rarely shared with other members of the family unit. Their additional roles, therefore, are added to those they already have, with an accompanying increase in women's work load and burden of responsibility for the home.

Motherhood, in this case, was also felt to be a "burden," as the attendant responsibilities for the care of their children, as well as the care of the family as a whole, and their responsibility for household chores, represent important barriers to training and skill development opportunities, as well as their ability to take on, and keep, a job, regardless how it might benefit the family in other ways.

Nevertheless, the importance that the women give to their professional development and advancement as an important part of their life trajectory

is a conscious choice to move beyond the constraints of traditional gender roles, without abandoning their desire for children and a balanced family life. While the difficulty the women who participated in this research experienced in achieving this balance continues to be a result of an unequal socialization process that prevails in some of their geographical contexts and lives, according to Andrea O'Reilly (2004), who identifies two dissonant aspects of motherhood (the socially constructed gender discourse and the realities of women's experiences associated with motherhood), this does not play down the fact that motherhood was highlighted by the women as the most significant event in their lives, something they would not trade for any other experience.

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