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Pandemic-Intensified Motherhood: Making Sense of Increased Mothering Pressures during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant stay-at-home orders and school shutdowns initiated a period of unprecedented household labour and childrearing for families across the world. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with seventy-six mothers from across the United States, I examine the increased demands placed on mothers as a result of the stay-at-home orders and the role of existing social and structural factors in fostering and maintaining these demands. I utilize the lens of intensive mothering to understand how mothers made sense of the augmented workload during the pandemic as well as the ways intensive mothering influences how mothers adapt to and meet these increased demands.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes in work and family organization. As the virus ravaged communities, stay-at-home orders were expected to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus. At the onset of the pandemic, as offices shuttered and many schools across the world switched to remote learning, all but those deemed essential workers were strongly encouraged to stay home. Although academic research on the effects of the pandemic across multiple areas is beginning to emerge, the news media has widely covered the experience of lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and remote schooling on parents and children. One of the themes that has arisen is the increased demands placed on mothers as schools and daycare centres closed their doors. It is a well-documented fact that, on average, women spend more time on household duties than their male partners. Mothers spend more time caring for their children, carrying out household chores, and overseeing the general management of the household (Barroso; Daminger; Gerson). Given the gendered household labour breakdown, the pandemic exacerbated an existing unequal division of labour.

In this article, I examine the increased demands placed on mothers as a result of the stay-at-home orders and the role of existing social and structural factors in fostering and maintaining these demands. I utilize the lens of intensive mothering to understand not only how mothers made sense of the augmented workload during the pandemic but also how as an ideology—defined as a system of ideas that shapes structural policy and individual choices—intensive mothering justified school closures throughout this period.

Intensive Mothering

As a result of the pandemic lockdowns and restrictions, the intensity of parenting grew exponentially. Parents who relied on outside childcare—ranging from in-person school, daycare, and/or paid or unpaid caregivers—suddenly found themselves as the sole childcare providers. Mothers, in particular, faced increased expectations in this area. In the absence of in-person education, mothers were expected to educate or assist in the education of their child while also acting as their child's confidantes and playmates; they had to simultaneously prepare meals and ease new anxieties as COVID-19 fears peaked across the globe. Mothers worked around the clock to meet their child's needs, putting their own needs aside in the process. This child-centred and child-dominant mothering is rooted in the principles of intensive mothering. Intensive mothering supports the neoliberal state by capitalizing on and moralizing the unpaid labour of mothers to care for, nurture, and produce children who, in the future, can serve the interests of a capitalist economy. Even as safety nets and support for families has fallen in the United States (US), intensive mothering continues to be one of the most dominant mothering ideologies (Arendell; Avishai; Douglas and Michaels; Hattery; Hays). Whereas Sharon Hays's influential study on intensive mothering concentrates primarily on white women, studies following this work show that the intensive mothering ideology is experienced and practised across racial, ethnic, and social class groups (Blair-Loy and Dehart; McCormack).

In 1996, sociologist Sharon Hays introduced the term intensive mothering—a type of mothering defined as "child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive" (8). This ideology centres on a gendered belief that childrearing lies primarily with women and that children and childrearing are so significant for families that households should be organized around the needs of children. Hays defines the ideology of intensive mothering as a "cultural contradiction" in that women are expected to be selfless and child centric while maintaining or pursuing careers that are demanding and take time away from the home and the child. Hays's findings point to an immense pressure to meet the demands of intensive parenting, coupled with the conviction that parenting is an inherent skill intrinsic to

mothers, not fathers (even if fathers are well intentioned). Mothers may question both the utility and validity of intensive mothering through recognizing the unreasonable demands of self-sacrifice that mothers must make to be wholly invested in this ideology. Nonetheless, mothers are influenced by larger social structures that continuously pressure women to be both career focussed and intensive mothers (Blair-Loy and Dehart; Ennis; Lamar et al.; Stone).

Socialization/Reproduction of Intensive Mothering

Mothers are continuously socialized into reproducing the ideology of good parenting through intensive mothering. Interactions with other parents and messages from traditional and social media as well as schools and daycares are constants in the background of the good mother-bad mother discourse. Mothers internalize messages that good mothers are those that protect and care for her children above all else and that "bad mothers" pay more attention to themselves or their careers (Guendouzi).

To dismiss intensive mothering as a choice begets a larger sociological discussion of the role of agency and self-determination in the construction of motherhood and the act of mothering. Intensive mothering is both a product of the socialization of motherhood and a response to the larger neoliberal institutions that fail to consistently provide for and protect children, families, and their futures. Whereas Hays views intensive mothering in opposition to capitalism and as a way to express "fundamental and irreducible ambivalence about a society based solely on the competitive pursuit of self-interest" (18), other scholars have pointed to the increasing competition, the lack of institutional support, and the ambiguity of class reproduction for middle-class families—all effects of the neoliberal political economy—as factors that drive intensive mothering (Brown; Wall). Capitalism exacerbates the demands on mothers to nurture, educate, and provide a strong foundation for their children in light of uncertain future prospects and lack of institutional support. The drive towards intensive mothering and the pressure to provide resources to children in the absence of state programs became even more prominent throughout the pandemic.

COVID-19 Lockdown and Intensive Mothering

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the media abounded with articles on the increased expectations of women in general and mothers in particular. One poignant series featured in *The New York Times*, titled "The Primal Scream: America's Mothers Are in Crisis" (Bennett et al.), showcased a collection of articles examining the myriad crises endured by mothers as a

result of the pandemic and school shutdowns. The series featured interviews with working mothers and the various mental health ailments that resulted from the excessive work and childcare responsibilities mothers faced. The articles not only showcased the deep mental, emotional, and psychological crisis mothers were facing but also offered advice on how to navigate demands of works and increased parental responsibilities. Although the work was thoughtful and moving, even if limited in its scope and data analysis, questions on how and why mothers bore the brunt of the pandemic workload were absent from the series. Other news articles also highlighted the plight of working mothers and the mental acrobatics women undertook on a daily basis to simultaneously work and care for their children during school shutdowns (Bennett et al.; Grose; Lakshmin, "Mothers"; Lakshmin, "How Society"; Lenz; Lewis). The scholarly research that has emerged in this area gives credence to the trends highlighted in popular media.

Andrea O'Reilly examines why mothers are not considered essential workers by analyzing the comments and discussions in a Facebook group she started for working mothers during the pandemic. O'Reilly concludes that mothers do not "count"; it is not only that mothers' work is invisible but also that their role as an essential provider of care is not visible to society. This sentiment is echoed by Fiona Green and O'Reilly in their introduction to their edited volume, in which they write: "Despite the cataclysmic upheavals of the pandemic, one fact remains unchanged: Motherwork remains invisible, devalued, and taken for granted" (22).

During the height of pandemic stay-at-home orders, May Freidman et al. surveyed eighty mothers about their experiences. While the sample was overwhelmingly white and middle class and therefore not representative of the diversity of motherhood and motherwork, the narrative that emerges from this research shows how relentless the work of mothering has been during the pandemic, resulting in a myriad of isolating and trying experiences for mothers. Other studies also look at the increased expectations placed on mothers and the ensuing mental health crisis (Babore et al.), the decreasing productivity (measured in academic output for example) (Gabster et al.), and the drop in labour force participation among mothers (Petts et al.). The special issue of the *Journal of Motherhood Initiative* titled "Academic Motherhood and COVID-19" examines issues of motherhood, gendered labour, increased expectations, parenting, and unequal division of labour from the experiences of mothers in academia. The collection of articles shows the nuanced ways in which mothers coped and navigated increased demands on their emotional, intellectual, and physical labour.

Another study examined the role of race and socioeconomic class in the experiences of families during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen et al.). The authors found that lower-income parents and

families of colour reported more financial stress and hardship than white families and/or middle- and upper-middle-class families. Single mothers were disproportionally affected by the care crisis brought on by the pandemic, as their prepandemic networks were no longer tenable (Hertz et al.).

The research I have undertaken shows similar patterns—mothers across socioeconomic and racial and ethnic groups reported feeling overworked, undervalued, and suffering mental and physical health lapses. Moreover, while families in lower income groups were more likely to express stress surrounding their financial situation, mothers of colour as well as lower-income mothers felt pressure to provide outsize support for their children.

There are a number of factors that contribute to the disproportionate work that has been placed on mothers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including but not limited to pre-existing structural inequality in the labour force, inadequate investment in childcare resources, and deep-seated gender roles. In this article, I seek to shed light on how mothers understand and give meaning to their experiences during the pandemic through the lens of intensive motherhood.

Methodology

In March of 2020, my own children's school shuttered for what I hoped would only be a few weeks but turned out to be more than a year. The first few months at home juggling work, children, and domestic duties involved countless hours of time spent sharing stories with other mothers—via text chains, social media, as well as phone and video calls. Throughout these months, I took note of how the mothers I was in contact with either directly or through social media made sense of their experience as mothers and as paid workers in the labour force. The media abounded with stories of mothers taking conference calls in closets or napping in their cars—stories that rang very true in personal conversations—yet social media swarmed with posts on engaging with your child while text groups shared online educational resources and countless ideas for enrichment. Mothers were torn about how to help their children navigate school shutdowns while facing mental and physical health crises of their own. Mothers in private conversations shared stories of despair, anguish, and depression yet they felt immense pressure to mother as intensively or even more intensively than they had prior to the stay-at-home orders enacted in March 2020.

In September 2020, when it became clear that many schools across the country would remain closed or only partially open for in-person learning, I began to ask questions on how mothers had managed and would cope with added stressors and responsibilities. Would the majority of mothers continue intensive parenting in the face of remote learning and, for many, increased

paid-work pressures? How would mothers make sense and meaning out of these new roles? And more importantly, would the pandemic stay-at-home orders change how mothers understood and carried out their function in society?

During this period, I began interviewing mothers of school-aged children about their experiences mothering during the pandemic. Seventy-six mothers across the US participated in the research. To recruit participants, I initially posted on Facebook parenting groups across the country; some of the groups were primarily white women, some were diverse across racial and ethnic groups, whereas others were comprised of mothers who identified as Black or Latina. For groups that I was not a member of, I reached out to the founder/owner and asked them to post on my behalf. I also made a concerted effort to reach women in single-headed households or with political leanings different from my own network. In addition, I contacted various school and parent-based listservs and reached out to mothers in my existing network. From this initial sample, I used snowball sampling to reach other mothers. The in-depth interviews were conducted throughout the months spanning September 2020 through May 2021, in the midst of the pandemic. Two interviews were conducted in person and one via telephone; the remaining interviews took place over Zoom and were recorded with consent from the participants. All the interviews were transcribed using computer-aided transcription software and were coded through the qualitative software program Atlas T.i.

Measures

I interviewed the seventy-six women through an open-ended questionnaire. Each interview lasted, on average, 1.5 hours. The interviews consisted of several themes, including past and current household division of labour, paid-work obligations, parenting ideologies, and past and current expectations of motherhood roles, as well as the socialization of motherhood, such as questions about networks, media, and family of origin. In addition, I asked a series of questions regarding the function of schools and institutional support for children and families as a way to understand the pressures of intensive mothering as a product of the neoliberal state.

Participants

The participants in the sample were all mothers with school-aged children. Mothers ranged in age from twenty-five to fifty-seven, with an average age of forty-one. The modal category of race was white. Twelve per cent were Black, 4 per cent reported their race as mixed or multiracial, 7 per cent were Latinx, 4 per cent identified as Afro-Latinx, 8 per cent reported their race as Asian,

and 3 per cent self-identified as other. Mothers had, on average, 1.8 children with a range of one to four children. Children ranged in ages from three months to young adults, although the focus of the questions was on school-aged children (ages five to eighteen). The majority of mothers were married or living with a long-term partner; 14 per cent were divorced, separated, or widowed, and four per cent had never been married. All but two of the married/partnered couples were in opposite sex dyads. At the time of the interviews, 50 per cent of the respondents were employed full time; 33 per cent worked part-time, and 17 per cent were either unemployed, furloughed, or did not participate in the paid labour force. The sample is limited in that it skews white, urban, and middle class, yet there is a significant number of participants from other racial and socioeconomic groups, and the experiences of intensive mothering throughout the pandemic were echoed across all of the groups represented in the study. It is important to point out that a number of factors—in particular the availability of space, additional resources of time and hired help, as well as paid-work obligations—mediated the pressures of mothering during this period. For example, some mothers had access to paid live-in childcare or were able to temporarily move in with grandparents, alleviating some of the childcare burdens. Three of the women worked in healthcare and four women were teachers, and their mental health was particularly affected during this period. However, due to limitation of space, this article will focus on overall trends among mothers during the period studied.

Results

Twindemic: Overworked and Undervalued

Carly, a public-school teacher and a mother of two, lives with her husband, mother, and grandmother in Queens, New York. When the pandemic hit, she ordered craft kits from the internet, instituted daily outdoor time, created colour-coded schedules for various activities, and read to her children every afternoon. She also continued teaching her third-grade class through a combination of live virtual platforms and asynchronous learning. In between breaks, she made sure her grandmother who lived in Carly's home took her medicine while also preparing meals for her family. Her husband, also a teacher, had made a space for himself upstairs and worked throughout the day away from what Carly called the "family circus." A few months into the stay-at-home order, Carly gave up the schedules and crafts and relied on internet subscriptions to entertain her children while she worked. When her youngest son started daycare in the fall of 2020, she continued to work many nights while her family slept:

> After I dropped my son off [at daycare], I'd rush back home to get on Zoom at 8:20 [a.m.]. And then on my prep, instead of doing my work, I was like giving my grandma breakfast, emptying her commode, giving her pills, and then running back to the computer teaching. And then lunchtime, I would get my daughter from my mom, put her down for her nap. Um, and then give my grandma her lunch and stuff. And then I would end up doing work, I don't know, at night, and what ended up working for me, cause I'm just exhausted at night. And I, I need to like to be a good teacher and a good mother and just have like something in my cup for myself. I can't do work every night. So, what works better for me is if I just take one night, and I, you know, my kids go to bed early; everyone's shut down here. So, seven-thirty to midnight, like I'm just going to power through, get everything done, like done for the week and just pull one or two nights of that. So, then I have the other nights to myself, like how I tried to find a balance.

Even with this "balance," Carly felt overworked and undervalued both at home and at school. She employed terms like "good mother" and "bad mother" throughout the interview to signal the ways in which she was attempting to be a good mother—intensive enrichment as well as being nurturing and selfless—yet often feeling like she was failing at it. She saw herself as a "bad mother" when she lost her patience or experienced feelings of resentment towards her family. At the same time, she was aggrieved that her husband did not take a more active role in providing enrichment for the children and repeatedly pointed out that they were both teachers working from home. Yet despite her feelings of anger and resentment, she continued to practice intensive mothering through enrichment exercises, nurture, and above all self-sacrifice because as she put it, "if I don't do it, no one will." Like Carly, almost all (95 per cent) of the working mothers in the sample had similar stories of waking up early, staying up late, forgoing sleep to complete their paid work-tasks while providing essential mothering duties: playing with their children, assisting with schoolwork, and providing emotional support. Yet despite the near constant work, many expressed sentiments surrounding actions that rendered them "bad mothers" and "bad employees."

Effia is a widow with two young children and lives in the DC area. She often rose early to put in hours at work before her children awoke but was never able to catch up at work or at home:

> I woke up like two to three hours before they [children] woke up and then once they were awake, then I kind of had to be on with them. And once, you know, school started for my older son. I've kind of checked in with him, get him online, partly do work for me, you

> know, this sort of in and out kind of stuff all day long. And then once the school day was finished, I sort of focus on them. I'm still trying to do a little bit of work in between when they were playing with each other or watching TV. And then I make dinner for them, put them to bed. And then I would work again for another three or four hours because as much as I was working during the day and joining meetings, I wasn't actually able to concentrate with all the mom stuff and that. And so, I did that for a while, but then my body was starting to just kind of fall apart.

Effia eventually put her children in summer camp, and in the fall of 2020, she made the decision to use some of her savings to send her older child to private school, which was meeting in-person. Nonetheless, the pressure to both perform at work and at home—to be an intensive mother, while continuing to work productively—proved relentless. All of the 76 mothers that participated in the study expressed degrees of burnout, which the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as follows:

> A syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by three dimensions: 1) feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.

Although the WHO classifies this as a phenomenon that takes place in an occupational realm, I maintain that maternal caregiving, while not paid work, absolutely shares characteristics with paid occupational labour, and, as such, women in caregiving roles have experienced high rates of burnout. The pandemic took a toll on mothers' mental and physical health as well as their overall sense of wellbeing. This was true for women in two-parent and single-headed households and across all racial and ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Single mothers (18 per cent of the sample) in particular expressed higher degrees of overwork, both in terms of childcare and paid work. Although overwork was a main driver in feelings of exasperation or burnout, mothers in the study conveyed feeling undervalued and unheard. As one mother commented, "I was screaming into the abyss"—a phrase that later appeared (unrelated) in *The New York Times* series about the experience of mothers during the pandemic. Ninety-five per cent of mothers echoed her sentiments of despair and overwhelm.

Whereas most mothers (78 per cent) felt intense social and internal pressure to tirelessly provide entertainment, emotional support, educational enrichment, and opportunities for socializing, not all mothers had the resources to be able to do so. Single-headed households and mothers who worked outside the

home were often unable to supplement or supervise their children's remote education—a worry that figured prominently in conversation with these mothers. Nearly all mothers (90 per cent) noted spending immeasurable time thinking and worrying about their children's wellness, particularly as it pertained to the lack of socializing, increased stress, and the overuse of technology. Around one-fourth of the mothers in the sample felt shame at not having the time or energy to educate and/or nurture them. This was particularly true for mothers who had little to no outside support and a demanding work schedule. Ann, a single mother of an eight-year-old girl, explained how exasperated she felt about not being able to provide what she deemed her daughter needed:

> I am tired of people thinking I am a superwoman because I am working and raising my kid on my own during the pandemic. Sure, she's a good kid, and she's smart and is going to be fine. But I am the only person she socializes with—and I have to work. I have zero time, and I feel ashamed that I can't give her what she needs: friends, a family, more time with me. I don't even send her to hybrid school because the schedule is too disruptive. There is no after school, and I just can't drop everything in the middle of the day to pick her up.

Intensive mothering lies within the borders of a neoliberal ideology that places the onus of raising children on individual families in general and women in particular. The new demands of the pandemic underscored this ideology even further as families lost any of the paid or government-supported institutional support they had previously relied on (e.g., schools, daycare, and babysitters). As one mother said, "We are doing what we already did before—planning, playing, cooking, cleaning, just more of it, and now throw homeschooling on top of it." The work that mothers shouldered throughout the pandemic is a continuation of the fulfillment of mothering expectations that most of these mothers have been doing since the birth of their child.

When Mothering Always Falls on Mothers

May, a mother living in New York City, has a daughter and a son with special needs. Both of her children learned remotely until September 2020, when they were able to attend school a few days a week. May's pandemic routine mirrored those of many of the mothers in the study. Her work as a makeup artist halted, and she found herself at home overseeing her children's education and spending increased time on household duties. In addition to these tasks, May poured efforts into advocating for increased service provision for children with special needs. (Her son has diverse learning and emotional needs and, at the time of the interview, had not been receiving state-mandated services in person.) When I asked her how she was feeling and coping throughout this

time, she answered:

> I don't think about myself too much, I guess. And I know that that's something that is symptomatic to, to being the caretaker where it's like everyone else's needs are priority over my own. And it's funny, cause it's like, I'm the first one to tell other moms who are doing this work—"take care of yourself," "You've got to take make that appointment for yourself." And I'm the last one to take that advice.

Women in different-sex partnerships perform, on average, substantially more household and carework than men (Hess et al.). Factors such as entrenched gender roles and socialization of intensive motherhood contribute to the disproportional amount of labour that women perform in the household. However, it is the effects of past and current neoliberal economic and political systems that maintain the entrenchment of gender roles. Throughout the twentieth century, mothers have increased their participation in the paid labour force, but government support for childcare, parental leave, and family services has not kept pace. Concurrently, in the US, the lack of protection for workers and paltry social safety nets, such as unemployment benefits or welfare, continue to exert pressures on working women to meet the increased demands of paid labour.

It is important to note that a large minority of partnered mothers (30 per cent) reported a more balanced division of labour during the pandemic—due largely to the physical presence of their partners at home. As one mother told me, "He [spouse] finally sees what I do all day, and he can't escape to the office." However, the majority (68 per cent) of partnered mothers in the study took on additional household labour in relation to their spouses/partners. The economic imbalance and childcare arrangements that were in place prior to the pandemic continued to have a strong effect on the division of labour during the pandemic—even if both parents were at home. Betsy, a mother of three, met her husband while they were both studying at a prestigious college. Postgraduation, both Betsy and her husband began working full time and eventually enrolled in MBA programs. Betsy worked in management consulting and finance for a number of years before becoming pregnant with her first child. During the time she was employed, she explained that the division of labour was balanced, but shifted once she left the paid labour force.

Later in the interview, Betsy spoke about missing her work as well as her identity as someone beyond a caregiver and mother. Yet she also took pride in her husband's accomplishments and was quick to say that it would not have been possible for him to advance professionally without her support at home. Like many mothers whose careers take a backseat to parenting, Betsy left the paid labour force and cited such factors as an unreliable school calendar, the financial and emotional costs of childcare, as well as the lack of available

institutional and family support networks for providing care and enrichment to her children as insurmountable obstacles to dual career household and parenting. The pandemic heightened household and caregiving responsibilities, whereas the lack of support for families during this period served to underscore the individual responsibility of caring for and raising children. Betsy had anticipated returning to work in some capacity when the pandemic hit but explained that it was unfeasible given the lack of available childcare and that her support at home was essential:

> So, this was going to be the fall when I got back to something or at least look to see what was in New York, cause I've never worked in New York City. So, you know, all that stuff derailed because I've got three remote learners, and they're stressed out, right. We don't need another stressor in the house. And I think looking for work, you know, through the pandemic would be stressful for me, but I think having one more thing on my plate would also be stressful to the family because my husband's working more than full time. My kids are remote learners. And there's a lot of, you know, work to do—it's anxiety and talking through things with the kids and helping them with their social life. They're all kind of too young to manage their own social lives. So even just making sure they're connected to their friends; it's full time. There is no way I could be working now.

Betsy is quick to put her children's and family's needs before her own—as mothers have been socialized to do. Whereas Betsy's story illustrates how many upper-middle-class families navigate the increasingly excessive work demands of the corporate world, working-class mothers also face similar dilemmas. Lily, a Peruvian immigrant living in New York and a mother to two girls was employed as a nanny before the pandemic hit. She enjoyed both her work as well as the independence earning her own money afforded her. She explained that although she has a degree in tourism and leisure from her home country, it had proved too cumbersome to translate those skills into marketable ones in the US. When her children were born, she took on all the household and childcare responsibilities, whereas her husband worked as a teacher. Lily eventually found work as a nanny when her own children were enrolled in school, and the household division of labour shifted somewhat; her spouse took on some of the early evening childcare responsibilities before Lily arrived home. She had been working full time as a nanny for a few years when the pandemic hit, and the gendered division of labour that had been the norm in Lily's early days of childrearing returned. Lily stopped working in person, and whereas her husband, a teacher, was able to work remotely, Lily became solely responsible for all of the household and childcare duties. She explained that one person needed to be working closely with her children, which drove her

decision to stay home with her children:

> My husband was working from home, and I actually, there were people that needed help [families that needed paid childcare] in Riverdale, but I was a teacher. I became a teacher because of my kids, I had to teach them. So, I had to stay home because of them. We lost one income—a big chunk of money, and I have been living from savings. Well, my husband, we still get his income, but, um, we cut down a lot of things, and I had savings. So, that is what is helping us. But I had to stay home because my girls could not do it on their own, and then it was like it was in the beginning [when the girls were babies and toddlers]. I do everything, and my husband is always tired.

In the fall of 2021, Lily went back to work two days per week when her daughters were able to return to in-person school on a part-time basis. Yet she remains in most ways tied to the household and continues to do the bulk of the household labour. Lily and her spouse reverted back to a pattern whereby her husband's income and job security outweighed hers and therefore was valued and protected in a way that Lily's job was not. Like Lily, many mothers in partnered households found themselves returning to a division of labour in which the male partner's took precedence over that of the mother. Both Lily and Betsy illustrate how the cost and demand of early childcare continue to be a factor in the household division of labour and childcare responsibilities throughout their children's lives. 70 per cent of the mothers interviewed earned less than their partners. Mothers' careers often take a backseat to childrearing—either because mothers exit the labour force altogether or change careers or jobs to ones that are less demanding and offer more flexibility. These mothers made a cost-benefit calculation at some point in the early days of childrearing and took on the additional roles of childcare and household labour. As a result, when the pandemic hit, mothers were already performing disproportionate amounts of household labour.

When we include what sociologists call invisible labour—the planning, organizing, and caring labour that mothers overwhelmingly perform—the gender gap grows exponentially (Daminger). The women I interviewed mimic this pattern closely. All mothers reported carrying more of the visible and invisible household labour before the pandemic. Prepandemic, one-parent households relied on a bevy of paid help as well as family and friend networks, many of which became unavailable during the pandemic. School and daycare provided the bulk of the weekly childcare. Pandemic household and care labour overwhelmingly fell to the mothers in two-parent households. This is not to say that fathers did not increase the amount of household and childcare labour performed during this period; in fact, many of the mothers in the study reported that their spouses did indeed perform more of the visible work, such

as cleaning, helping with schoolwork, and playing than they had engaged in prior to the pandemic. In eight of the two-parent households, male partners took on the bulk of the remote learning assistance, particularly when there were infants at home, or fathers were seen as having higher skills in technology or certain school subjects. Fathers were also more likely to play with their children than they were to take on additional household cleaning or cooking. Nonetheless, the share of women's household and care labour increased disproportionately to that of their male partner.

Intensive mothering is the idea that children should be a mother's first and foremost priority, and sacrifices should be made to ensure this prioritization. Although mothers face innumerable social pressures in multiple areas of their lives—professional, homemaking, beauty standards, and likability—intensive mothering continues to place the onus of caregiving on women. Pandemic school closures reinforced the external and internal pressure of intensive mothering. Between March and June 2020, the first phase of school shutdowns in the US, many public schools were unable to meet the educational and socioemotional needs of children. Whereas some schools offered daily live virtual teaching, others only provided asynchronous remote education, often leaving students and parents to fend for themselves. Many mothers took on the additional tasks of supplementing schoolwork with tutoring, internet classes, art activities, and reading. Mothers felt pressured to make up for the lack of resources their children were not receiving, and their social networks reinforced this pressure.

Discussion and Conclusion

Screaming into the Abyss

The mothers in this study experienced a sense of being overburdened and burned out due to the extreme demands placed on their time as well as a sense of "not being heard." Yet they maintained an incredible sense of duty to keep providing for their family. Mothers took on more of the childrearing, productive entertaining, feeding, and household chores while feeling more at odds with the demands being placed on them. Even if some admitted to loosening their standards—perhaps by allowing more screen time, a messier house, or faster meals—the sheer amount of time and energy mothers spent with and for their families was much higher than before the pandemic. Yet all the mothers expressed throughout the interviews a strong sense of guilt and feelings of inadequacy.

I repeatedly asked respondents why they thought there was so much anger expressed by mothers in private but no real public outrage. Three important themes stood out in their discussion of this question. The first is the internalized sense of the qualities that define a good mother, which are the same qualities

that underlie the ideology of intensive mothering. The pandemic magnified the weight that women attach to their identities as mothers and the self-worth that accompanies this identity—in large part because the constant presence of their children made their roles as mothers the most prominent ones. A dominant theme in the discussion of good motherhood was the negation of the mother's own needs in the face of their family's needs across a number of dimensions. Mothers spent time, energy, and resources on ensuring their children were entertained, well fed, healthy, and had their emotional needs met. In contrast, mothers sacrificed hours of sleep, leisure time, paid-work hours, and mental and physical wellness to meet the demands of their families.

A second theme that emerged was the current structural conditions in the US that place the onus of childrearing and childcare on individual families and women in particular. A majority (83 per cent) of mothers in the study were employed in paid labour (although many worked part time), yet most had chosen or changed careers early in their childrearing years to reflect the existing childcare conditions. Mothers took on flexible jobs, or jobs that required less active time at the workplace, and some took time off to stay home with the children in the early years. As a result, many of the partnered women in the study earned lower incomes than their partners and/or were employed in careers that demanded less time. Single mothers were the ones that struggled the most, as they were not able to reduce their workload and depended heavily on extended family for assistance. When the pandemic hit, many mothers had already sacrificed some aspect of their careers to care for their children. The expectation of the neoliberal state is for families to be largely responsible for childcare needs. The pandemic childcare crisis was merely an extension of the existing political and economic structure that is already heavily reliant on women's unpaid labour.

The third theme that contributed to a lack of outrage was the entrenched gendered division of labour. Overall, mothers took control of remote schooling, additional childcare, and household chores during the pandemic. Although over 70 per cent of mothers in two-parent households reported that their spouses became more active participants within the households and increased their labour to levels higher than prior to the pandemic-induced shutdown, mothers continued to function as the anticipator, planner, and manager of the household. Mothers in two-parent households reported that this pattern was a result of the division of labour in the early years of childrearing—when many mothers, in the absence of affordable childcare or faced with taxing work schedules, moved out of high-pressure paid work and took on more responsibilities at home. Men were viewed as less capable at managing or less invested in what mothers deemed important facets of household management and childrearing.

Some of the possible policy implications that come out of this study centre

on the need to increase state support for childcare as well as universal parental leave. The majority of mothers (86 per cent) believed that childcare is (and should be) a function of public schools. They also maintained that the state should play a role in providing early childcare. All mothers pointed to the lack of government childcare programs, high cost of daycare, lack of meaningful parental leave, and increased precarity in the labour force as the most important factors that led to the kind of job and career choices (part-time work, flexible occupations, and lower pressure careers) that resulted in unequal economic power in the household. Family-oriented policies—such as mandated parental leave, early childcare, free after-school options, and summer and vacation childcare—can begin to dismantle the continued gendered labour force in and out of the household. For women to be able to fully participate in the paid labour force, the state needs to position itself as a partner in childrearing and shift the onus of responsibility from an individual, family-based ideology to a communal one. To be certain, intensive mothering is a result of both external pressures and entrenched socialization, yet the experiences of the mothers in this study suggest that the lack of support for working mothers serves as a catalyst for the entrenched socialization of this ideology.

Intensive mothering has been dominant in the discourse of parenting and mothering for decades. Even though the pandemic has exacerbated the demands on families in general and mothers in particular, mothers continue to view their successes and failures as mothers through this lens. The sacrifices of sleep, mental and physical health, careers, and personal pursuits were, while wholly lamented, pillars of self-worth used in the construction of ideal mothering during the pandemic. Mothers have deeply internalized the messages of motherhood as a gendered martyred role, and the larger societal failure to provide parents with a safety net during this time underscores the role of mothers as intrinsic providers of unsupported care. As one mother said to me: "The pandemic just highlighted what we [mothers] have already been doing. We have been doing it all with little help from day one. This is really not that different."

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