Guest editorial: Motherhood, work and the politics of care

Motherhood for me means loving someone more than myself, for the first time in my life - *Isabella*

Motherhood means energy, passion, pain and joy, all together - *Mariana*

Motherhood is a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of who I was, who I am, and who I want to be. - *Liela*

Motherhood is a journey full of emotions where ultimately, it is all the little things that matter the most - *Marke*

Background

The idea for this special issue was born out of various conversations and projects between the four of us over the years. We met more than a decade ago at Saint Mary's University, in Halifax, Canada, when most of us were childless, some of us still in the early beginnings of our Ph.D. programs. Over the years, all of us ended up creating families with one, two and three children, all of similar ages. Life happened, and we ended up on very different paths and in different corners around the world (Finland, Saudi Arabia, Chile and Canada). Over the course of time, we kept in touch, meeting at conferences, writing papers together and working on various projects. What came out of our conversations was how profoundly our experiences as mothers shaped our lives and how our work as academics was impacted by the various socio-cultural backgrounds and different life situations we found ourselves in. It was fascinating to exchange experiences and interpretations of motherhood in our various contexts, as well as find differences and, at the same time, commonalities. On our own and during our encounters collectively, we tried to make sense of our experiences, comparing, contrasting and drawing on the various bodies of knowledge to come to understand how life happens to us as mothers, working academics and members of our respective societies.

Motherhood provided us with a unique opportunity to delve into rethinking conceptual dichotomies, such as "messy" maternal experiences versus neat academic lives (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019), public versus private ways of mothering and rational thinking bodies versus emotional reproducing ones (Gatrell, 2013). We found ourselves conversing about how we wanted to mother and present ourselves as academics, exchanged experiences on contextual differences to child rearing and paused on the cultural differences in mothering. Stories of individualistic versus collective forms of mothering, degrees of familial support and the intrusion or overlap of our academic lives with our familial ones emerged. These discussions brought up how different our opportunities to organize care for our children were and how our academic identities were shaped by care-giving. We were making sense of our motherhood experiences through its multiplicity, complexity and beauty. We were connected by an experience so profound, and yet, we found ourselves being enthralled by the cultural nuances of our experiences. Our lines of questioning drove some of us to write and publish papers on motherhood discussing the societal and organizational othering practices women experience as they become mothers (Krysa and Kivijärvi, 2022), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on working mothers in organizations (Paludi *et al.*, 2023) and the overlooked economic value of motherhood, which pushes mothers away from economic discourses on development, production and recovery (Jamjoom, 2022). We wanted to hear more stories, and so we embarked on this journey of inviting other mothers and scholars examining these themes to describe experiences of motherhood at the intersection of work, care and socio-cultural context.

It was our aspiration to create a special issue where we could share stories of motherhood from different geographic locations, different socio-political contexts, identity positions and different methodological approaches. In short, we wanted to extend our conversation between the four of us on motherhood and our particular contexts to include many other lived experiences and stories on motherhood and work at the intersection of the politics of care. We approached our call to papers within a transnational feminist perspective (Mohanty, 2003, 2013), seeking mothers' stories from different geographic contexts. In doing so, we expand the sources of experiences and perspectives on motherhood, while also recognizing the interconnectedness of various social identities within various patriarchal structures of organizations and academic life (Van den Brink and Benschop, 2014). This approach intends to illuminate the complex interplay between multiple axes of identity and power within diverse contexts. In this special issue, we hope to challenge essentialist notions of motherhood and highlight the diverse and intersecting realities faced by mothers across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Theoretical debates on motherhood and the politics of care

"Motherhood penalty," the "second (and third) shift" and "neoliberal motherhood" – these are only some of the more well-known terminologies associated with motherhood, work and the politics of care. Since the early 1970s, research on gender and organizations has theoretically and empirically discussed the relevance of studying gendering within organizations (Acker, 1990, 1992, 2000, 2012; Acker and Van Houten, 1974). Despite several decades of gender equality rhetoric and feminist movements, women continue to be marginalized in the labor market, especially when they become mothers (Gatrell et al., 2017). Simultaneously, as shown in a review of research on motherhood in Western countries (Schmidt et al., 2023), women face multiple social norms of motherhood that seek to control their identities in family life and in paid work, and they are mostly expected to assume a neoliberal individualized responsibility when juggling with these normative expectations. Cultural assumptions about new mothers and their productivity continue to prevail in contemporary society and become barriers for working mothers in organizations. Women are considered less career-oriented and less committed to their work than their male counterparts (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Ruitenberg, 2014). It is assumed that they will change their productivity patterns once they become parents and shift their focus from work to childcare. As such, assumptions prevail that women will reduce their workloads once they have children and will redirect their priorities toward family obligations away from their work commitments. Such views create societal norms that inevitably result in structural organizational barriers and the so-called glass ceiling effect (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Haynes, 2008; Hennekam et al., 2019; Socratous et al., 2016).

An important aspect of motherhood, work and care is the nature of organizational support. Overall, gendered workplace practices encourage the image of the "generic female parent" (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005, p. 156). This is also confirmed in Lewis and Humbert's (2010) study on flexible workplaces that provided compressed workweeks and flexible work schedules to support mothers. In spite of organizational flexibility, the discourse of masculine norms within organizations and normative expectations towards mothers undermined the effectiveness of organizational reorganizations. As a result, women, and more so mothers, continue to experience the glass-ceiling effects within organizations (Gatrell et al., 2017; Schnurr et al., 2020). There have been suggestions for the need to critically examine the devaluation of parental care within organizations. For example, Kelly and Senior (2021) call out for a feminist parental ethics to acknowledge that familial care responsibilities need to be better supported in organizations. It is shown that establishing work-family support at the workplace remains an organizational challenge (Heikkinen et al., 2021) and oftentimes

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organizations establish their human resource practices upon gendered expectations, viewing care responsibilities mainly as a woman's question (Holth *et al.*, 2017). If the role of care were put at the center instead of "production" as an integral part of the economic system for humans' well-being (Bhan *et al.*, 2020), organizations, society and individuals cannot remain the same. A sense of history about the forthcoming future of organizations and work should be addressed.

Research has shown that globally, women are responsible for 75% of all care and home duties (Moreira da Silva, 2019). Within the current neoliberal paradigm, the terminology of "hypocrisy economy" (Power, 2020) has been applied, referring to societal expectations requiring women to be productive workers while at the same time upholding the ideal of being exemplary mothers (Ashman *et al.*, 2022). Güney-Frahm (2020) interprets such expectations towards mothers as reflective of the "patriarchal and neoliberal worldviews" (Güney-Frahm, 2020, p. 5). Neoliberal feminism approaches (Rottenberg, 2018) have become popular in contemporary research – however, they speak broadly from the perspective of Western feminism. Such an approach may obscure geo-political differences in care work both theoretically and empirically and lack attention to intersectionality (Evans and Bussey-Chamberlain, 2021). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath further amplified the intersectional nature of working mothers' challenges, addressing, for example, the culturally bound, racialized and classed differences within the neoliberal paradigm (Dutta *et al.*, 2020). In Latin America, for example, the notions of womanhood and motherhood also need to be understood within their socio-political contexts (Paludi *et al.*, 2023). Motherhood is viewed as a glorified position of womanhood and a societal badge of honor (Ramm, 2020). On a societal level, this is reflected in heightened and oftentimes taken-for-granted, expectations towards women and their roles as mothers, resulting in gendered home and childcare practices (Yopo Díaz, 2018).

With that said, research also points to some similarities across the globe: gendered expectations toward care responsibilities increased at the onset of the pandemic in various geo-political locations such as Argentina and Chile (Paludi *et al.*, 2023); Ghana (Akuoko *et al.*, 2021), Iceland (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir, 2021) and the United States of America (Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022), among others. The effects of COVID-19 have gone beyond the personal effects on women's lives by reflecting on how policies and legislation should be reframed to support the care work of women and men (Miller, 2021). Debates on the need for effective and more institutionalized care services embedded within our economic structures (Li and Laughlin, 2023), the amount of unpaid labor resting on women's shoulders and the neoliberalization of motherhood (Güney-Frahm, 2020) continue to resonate in the post-COVID-19 era.

The papers of this special issue

To entangle the politics of care and gender, the papers that were chosen for this special issue showcase a variety of methodologies, such as autoethnographies (e.g. Baliç, 2024; Winham *et al.*, 2024) and geo-political locations (Turkey, Canada, Malaysia, UK and India).

"*Creating good knowledge together: heartful-communal storytelling at the intersection of caregiving and academia*" by Nina Winham, Kristin S. Williams, Liela A. Jamjoom, Kerry Watson, Heidi Weigand and Nicholous M. Deal provides a fascinating journey into the lived experience of the authors' Ph.D. journeys as they explore and co-develop a novel heartful communal storytelling approach. Inspired by the feminist tradition of writing differently, the authors engage in processes of individual and collective meaning making that demonstrate the potential for knowledge creation. The paper presents six narratives that broaden and deepen the understanding of motherhood, parenthood and care in scholarship and academia. They bring to life the complex processes of giving and receiving care within academia as

experienced through multiple identity positions. The processes of heartful communal storytelling open possibilities for challenging the dominant forms of knowledge construction within academia and, as such, holds potential to nurture alternative ways of seeing and being.

In the paper "*Academic mothers and the practice of embodied care: navigating and resisting uncaring structures in the neoliberal academy*" by Lara Pecis and Anne Touboulic, the authors take us through the bodily experiences of breastfeeding as academic mothers. Theoretically, the study compels us to critically address postfeminist sensibility as a dangerous narrative that encourages mothers to shoulder individual responsibility in terms of career and family duties while disregarding the structural inequalities already studied and well documented. Furthermore, the contemporary social media discourse promoting the idea that mothers can effortlessly juggle everything has permeated various types of organizations, including academia. This issue is explored in the paper as Lara Pecis and Anne Touboulic conduct an auto-ethnographic study on their breastfeeding experiences during the pandemic, a period when social media portrayed images of working mothers as epitomizing balance. The authors continue to delve into the crucial question of care, emphasizing its practical, material, emotional and political dimensions for individuals as well as its relational impact on organizations.

In "*How do you manage? An auto-ethnographic inquiry into contemporary maternal labor,*" Ilkay Baliç offers an auto-ethnographic piece surfacing the maternal mental and physical labor involved in her first seven years of mothering in Turkey. The author describes writing the piece as an excavation into her mothering experience, where she reflects on her struggles "to invent a peculiar maternal subjectivity" and witnessed a "dissolution of spatial, temporal, and sensorial boundaries". Through a symmetrical analysis of her management position and her role as a mother, Ilkay Baliç highlights the similarities between the two forms of labor. Organizing her article into three contemporary vignettes, the author questions neoliberal motherhood, marital fairness, the economy of gratitude and the incessant work of mothers in this highly digitized economy. Citing Federici (2012), she writes, "I realized that the reproduction of human beings is the foundation of every economic and political system and that the immense amount of paid and unpaid domestic work done by women in the home is what keeps the world moving" (p. 2).

Noting the contextual differences to motherhood, Priya Kataria and Shelly Pandey in their article "*Stuck between the ideal worker and the bread winner: experiences of motherhood and work during the COVID-19 pandemic in India,*" explore the mothering experiences of middle-class working mothers in the information technology-enabled service sector in India. The authors describe the contentions between ideal worker norms and the adult worker model, where male breadwinner norms and autonomy are brought into question. The pandemic surfaced realizations of the absence of care within organizations and the unequal division of unpaid labor. Social distancing measures eliminated the outsourcing of childcare, prevalent within Indian middle-class societies, thereby creating epiphanies of societal paradoxes during and post-pandemic. The authors highlight the importance of centering care within organizations and creating inclusive care practices that center fathers' and mothers' contributions within the home.

Melissa Yoong and Nourhan Mohamed examine opting-out as a site of power and resistance in their article "'*I felt sad then, I feel free now': a case for examining the constructive resistance of opted-out mothers*". The authors believe that opting-out can be viewed as process of (re)molding one's identity. Based on an analysis of Malaysian middle-class mothers who have opted out from the formal workforce, the authors propose the concept of "constructive resistance" that brings to light how these mothers navigate the dominant norms surrounding motherhood and work. The paper shows and discusses the opted-out mothers' subversive (re)molding of themselves and how speaking from alternative positions disrupts the dominant ways of being.

The final paper of our special issue brings together our geopolitically diverse journey to a global study. In their research on gender equity in the arrangement of work since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cristen Dalessandro, Daniel Patterson and Alexander Lovell

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investigate how workplace choices and care duties intersect with gender. The authors conducted a quantitative study on the perception of work and gender, focusing on data from North America, South America, Europe and Asia. Drawing on research of the post-2020 economy, the authors focus on women's perception of choice regarding work in comparison to that of their partners, to what extent domestic duties impact the perception of choice and in what way gender and domestic responsibilities interact to shape workers' perceptions of choice regarding work arrangement.

Moving forward

These six pieces from different parts of the globe contribute to the ongoing scholarly examinations of gendering that continue to affect women's work and shape their identities at the borders of home and work. We hope this special issue encourages research on multiple forms of resistance and reshapes ways of being for working mothers. We hope it encourages a sense of sharing from other mothers and makes more transparent the socio-cultural differences and similarities to mothering experiences.

We continue to call for deeper exploration and critical engagement of care. How can we institutionalize care within our systems so as to dismantle the "hypocrisy economy" (Power, 2020), which creates added burdens on women? How can care and work be discussed not as dichotomous structures but as intertwined notions embedded within each other? How can we continue to explore mothering and forms of mothering in different contexts and through different methodologies, means and mediums? We call on others to continue within this exploration and to center care within the process.

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