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Motherhood and Guilt in a Pandemic: Negotiating the ‘New’ Normal with a Feminist Identity

*“We wish we could be like this forever,
it is so much better when you spend time with us”.*

Abstract

Mothers who work and identify as feminists have been thrust into a new ‘COVID-19 normal’, finding themselves taking on roles that are ‘at odds’ with their feminist identity (i.e., the bulk of more ‘traditional’ stay-at home-parenting, home-schooling, and domestic chores) whilst simultaneously navigating the expectations of neoliberal careerism embedded within female emancipation discourses that have been so hard-won. In this piece, we draw on critical femininities to highlight how these identities are embedded in several push-pull discourses that simultaneously resonate and discord, and show that these understandings are difficult to detangle from neoliberal social constructions and expectations that have women self-policing even their inner psyche lest we become ‘bad’ feminists. Further, we acknowledge how our sensemaking in this paper and our experiences are rooted in (and limited by) the socioeconomic privileges of being western white middle class cis-gender women in predominantly non-precarious positions – indeed, mothers who work are not a homogenous group and the many different voices reflect different levels of job security.

Keywords: COVID-19, motherhood, neoliberal, critical femininity, femmephobia.

Introduction

“The best thing about the [coronavirus] is all this time that we spend together, isn’t it, mama?”

In this reflective piece for *Feminist Frontiers*, we explore our sensemaking of how we negotiate our *lived experiences* of motherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic with the expectations of neoliberal *commodified* feminism. Is there a space for mothers who work to embrace motherhood during the pandemic without feeling like a ‘bad’ feminist? What kind of a place is this ‘new normal’, embedded in expectations of neoliberal productivity, for women who are mothering and (paid) working at the same time? How do our lived experiences of the pandemic grapple with the neoliberal feminist social ideals of ‘having it all’ – that women need to (paid) work (successfully) to be seen as equals and at the same time must be devoted mothers? We acknowledge that in feminism’s early roots there was a need for

this sort of equality - that for women to be empowered, they needed to mimic white middle class men and to be the ‘same as’ men because women enjoyed little of the privileges awarded to men (e.g., voting rights, access to education, economic independence etc.). Yet, we also acknowledge that femininity is “not inherently disempowering or oppressive” and that a femme theory lens can allow us to focus on the complexities of women’s lived experiences and to understand these beyond patriarchy (Hoskin, 2019a, p. 5).

We are saddened that our reflections are rooted in such a tumultuous global phenomenon and do not want to seem opportunistic in our engagement, for the COVID-19 pandemic has spiralled 47 million more women into poverty globally (Reuters, 2020). The pandemic has seen 23% more British mothers than fathers lose their jobs (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020) and up to 75% of United Kingdom (UK) mothers had to decrease their working hours during lockdown (World Economic Forum, 2020) and performed most - even more than before - of the childcare and chores (BBC, 2020). Mothers have reduced their working hours substantially, by over 1/5th, and even whilst working, experience frequent interruptions; for every hour that a father spends working without interruptions, mothers have on average only 20 minutes:

"Mothers are more likely than fathers to have moved out of paid work since the start of lockdown. They have reduced their working hours more than fathers even if they are still working and they experience more interruptions while they work from home than fathers, particularly due to caring for children. Together these factors mean that mothers now are only doing a third of the uninterrupted paid-work hours that fathers are. A risk is that the lockdown leads to a further increase in the gender wage gap" (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020).

Indeed, even the flexibility of home working might pose yet another obstacle in mothers’ careers; whilst a similar number of men and women are now working from home, Britons think that home working is four times more likely to damage a woman’s career (Ipsos Mori, 2020a). Certainly, women are finding it much harder to remain positive during the COVID-19 crisis (Ipsos Mori, 2020b).

At the same time, social media is abound with the lived experiences of some mothers who are savouring baking banana bread and enjoying child-rearing (e.g., MumsNet; Heart Radio, 2020). Our doubts around our children’s education, our careers, and our position in the wider community were intensified as we took on (and dared to enjoy) these so-called ‘traditional’ tasks that our early feminist pioneers fought so hard to emancipate us from. Thrust into the ‘gendered’ role of being primary child-rearer, home-schooler, housekeeper – and banana bread baker, some of us also experienced something different, something calmer and more peaceful, perhaps the opportunity to re-evaluate success (e.g., The Guardian, 2020a). In an age where women have been increasingly empowered to ‘smash glass ceilings’ and reject traditional stay-at-home gender roles in favour of ‘having it all’, the Covid-19 pandemic has also allowed us a brief glimpse of what a different pace of life and a more sustainable world might look like, and brought to the forefront the many conflicting narratives that we, as mothers who work in a neoliberal context, embody on a daily basis.

How Neoliberalism has Permeated Mothering and Feminism

We live in deeply entrenched cultural ideals of ‘perfect’ mothering (Lamar et al., 2019). Indeed, dominant mothering discourses in the west (e.g., intensive mothering; Hays, 1996) are based on ideals that promote the notion that ‘good’ mothers invest themselves and the majority of their time and resources into developing their children’s wellbeing, that ‘good’ mothers are constantly available and responsible for nurturing the success of their children. Failure to adhere to these standards of motherhood are associated with perceived risks (Smyth & Craig, 2017). Mothers who feel the pressure to be ‘perfect’ mothers experience greater burnout (Meeussen & VanLaar, 2018) and give up their leisure time to compensate (Aarntzen et al., 2019). Further, neoliberal narratives of motherhood are complicit with capitalism and lead to the mushrooming of for-profit ideals of ‘best’ mothering (Lamar et al., 2019). Indeed, we have witnessed a shift in representations of motherhood and corporatized mothering practices produced for profit (e.g., infant sleep trainers, potty training experts, ‘super’ nannies) and even the consumption of pregnancy via ‘celebrity motherhood’ (Tsaliki, 2019). While online spaces have given safe haven to mothers to engage with their identity as mothers and even resist the ‘good’ mother ideal, for example by posting on NetMums (Pedersen's (2016), they have also at the same time enabled neoliberal motherhood practices to burgeon, for example cybermums (Lerner, 2018) and mompreneurs (Anderson and Moore, 2014). In these ways, the marriage between neoliberalism and motherhood has brought about the commodification of motherhood and presented the (seductive) idea that women can reconcile neoliberal economism with their mothering practices.

At the same time, neoliberalism has also benefited from the feminist movement (Gill, 2007; 2008) whilst simultaneously working against genuine and authentic female solidarity (Güney-Frahm, 2020). Rooted in an emancipatory ideal that aims to ‘free’ women from the home (which sits well with feminist ideals), neoliberal objectives are then to embed these ‘free’ women into the economy as workers and consumers. As Greer (2009) notes, this new wave of feminism is a “market-led phenomenon” that assures women that they can ‘have it all’ – a successful corporate career, devoted and selfless mothering, and homogenous standards of beauty. In this way, neoliberalism benefits from adopting corporatized feminist discourses such as ‘lean in’ and ‘smash the glass ceiling’ because these views of femininity are serving neoliberal aims of producing and reproducing workers. It is, however, an impossible position for women – to be the ‘perfect’ Insta-mother *and* the ideal worker who ‘has it all’; to be ‘good’ mothers who are constantly available to nurture the success of their children (so that they too one day will be productive workers) all the while being constantly available as highly productive workers...and do not forget to dress ‘sexier’ and at the same time appear more professional on Zoom meetings (Sky News, 2020). Indeed, women are constantly bombarded with patriarchal social norms to achieve the “‘right’ form of hyper-sexual femininity” (Bailey et al., 2015: 747). This constant push/pull ebb and flow of conflicting narratives imposed on women’s lives is endemic throughout

patriarchal society, for instance, the binary positioning of women as either compliant virgins or pariah sluts (e.g., Schippers, 2007; Darwin, 2017), as either needing protection from good men or preying on these same good men (e.g., Schemenauer, 2012; Bay-Cheng, Bruns and Maguin, 2018), or even the public health discourse glorifying *breastmilk* but the societal stigmatisation of *breastfeeding* (Whiley et al., 2020). These crude dichotomisations reinforce patriarchy and confine women's personhoods to rigid social norms: good or bad (Bareket et al., 2018). The conflict between 'good' mother and 'good' worker became all the more apparent during the COVID-19 lockdowns as we found ourselves forcibly sent back into being home-makers, potentially 'undoing' what decades of feminism fought against (The Guardian, 2020a). Further, lockdown brought down the fragile façade of separation between home and work that allowed women to be mothers at home and transform into professionals at work.

It is these same conflicting neoliberal narratives that position 'women's work' in the home as devalued and lesser than that corporate success, which we argue are rooted in femmephobic views that still position femininity as inferior to the masculine (Hoskin, 2019b, 2019a). Despite itself, neoliberal corporatized feminism devalues the lived experiences of many mothers who work and exacerbates inequalities. Why are mothers seen as 'sacrificing' careers to home-school as if the idea of home-schooling/child-rearing is an insult or lesser than a career? Contemporary discourses of feminism such as 'lean in' and 'have it all' are embedded in neoliberal ideals that push capitalist agendas and still rely on devaluing child-rearing, such that, success is socially constructed to be a *working* mother who has to excel on every level: at home *and* at work. The traditional 'good mother' narrative of stay-at-home-mothers "entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations" (Johnston & Swanson, 2006:509) has met "business suits, big hair and lipstick" (Greer, 1970) – neither of these ideals are adequate in sensemaking our lived experiences during the lockdown.

Is There Space For A New 'New Normal'?

"If it wasn't for the [coronavirus] ..."

Instead, our application of critical femininity to the experiences of mothers who work opens up an alternative narrative that acknowledges the often-unseen labour that women do in the home as meaningful and valuable work that contributes to society. Community ties and engagement as well as child-rearing can be seen as practices that unite us to achieve a common communal goal (contrasted to neoliberal individualist goals). Indeed, this point of view sits well with decolonial feminist views (e.g., Manning, 2016). Sensemaking our lockdown experiences via the lens of critical femininity and femmephobia (Hoskin, 2019a, 2019b; Hoskin & Taylor, 2019) allows for the possibility that mothers who work can simultaneously relish their lived experiences with their children *and* grieve for its loss. We can recognise the impossibility of neoliberal pressures to be 'good' working mothers and legitimise the nuanced emotions that some of us have felt during this period. For example, the beautiful reward of

my daughters turning to me after a day of baking and planting herbs and saying, “we wish we could be like this forever, it is so much better when you spend time with us”. Later, we saw our children excitedly return to school – they too had enjoyed their gift of time with us but also relished getting back into their old routines, to their friends and peers. We enjoyed slow breakfasts together and bedtime routines were leisurely without being squeezed in after a long day at the office and a lengthy commute; we even savoured lunches together. Yet, the two worlds and identities were in constant tension. Children would barge into Zoom calls, demanding biscuits (The Guardian, 2020c) – and even breastfeeds! It was also not a choice; the structures that held our worlds separate and (barely) functional collapsed, the two worlds of home and work collided, and we could constantly feel the trade-off between one and the other. What prevents women who felt isolated and itched to return to the office from acknowledging so without feeling like a ‘bad’ mother? What prevents women who enjoyed full-time mothering to acknowledge so without feeling like a ‘bad’ feminist?

The ‘guilt thing’ arises when we try to reconcile what society positions as conflicting narratives of ‘good’ mothers and ‘good’ workers (Guendouzi, 2006). Mothers often experience guilt (Borelli et al., 2017) and give up their own leisure time and think about decreasing work (Aarntzen et al., 2019) to accommodate home responsibilities. After years of getting educated, fighting our way through patriarchy, and earning a place in successful careers, we have swapped one sense of guilt (rationing time with our kids) for another: being a ‘bad’ feminist by allegedly catering to patriarchy’s prescribed gender norms by daring to enjoy our experiences of motherhood. Indeed, headlines scream, “*The Coronavirus is a disaster for feminism*” – *The Atlantic*, 19 March 2020, and “*This pandemic threatens to undo what generations of feminists have fought for*” – *The Guardian*, 21 May 2020. Our very own experiences embody this guilt. In many ways, patriarchal identity formation is about facilitating feelings of guilt in women (Elvin-Nowak, 1999). Guilt at how we feed our babies (Williams et al., 2013), guilt for going back to work (Murray, 2015) and guilt for staying at home (Rubin and Wooten, 2007). Further, neoliberal corporatized feminism relies on self-surveillance (Martinussen et al., 2020), which in turn are rooted in anti-femininity and femmephobic ideas (Hoskin & Taylor, 2019). Others have already shown how women are complicit in policing other women’s adherence to social norms; their mothering practices (Grant et al., 2017), breastfeeding choices (Tomori et al., 2016), childcare decisions (Murray, 2015), sexuality (Stone & Gorga, 2014), attire (Mavin & Grandy, 2016), behaviours (Berbary, 2012), and so much more. Indeed, guilt is an often used tool to sustain neoliberalism and patriarchy, and Stone and Gorga (2014) note that patriarchy gets reinforced via containment practices, femmephobic ‘policing’ (Hoskin, 2017), and ‘surveillance’ (Grant et al., 2017).

In closing, we ask, where does that leave us? COVID-19 has been a painful opportunity for us to understand that wealth is more than just capital wealth (Simon, 2020) and has given rise to a new narrative that allows us to question neoliberal consumerism (The Guardian, 2020a). We can look at ways of coming together in unity and reinforce the bonds of communities where we support each other (Women’s International League for Peace & Freedom, 2020); for example, my neighbourhood was

abound with groups who offered to do shopping for shielding neighbours and vulnerable community members. What does the future hold for feminist mothers who work? We know that women redirect their careers after ‘career breaks’ when resuming work towards care-orientated professions (that are unfortunately lower paid) (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). How do we reconcile this slower more appreciative and sustainable pace of life that goes against neoliberal corporate and individualistic values? Others have already argued how long undervalued and underpaid professions need to be given their due (e.g., Bahn et al., 2020; De Camargo & Whiley, 2020; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Certainly, the many voices of women are reflective of widely different lived experiences and our conceptual deliberations in this piece are entirely framed by and limited by our identities, which are benefiting from the privileges of being white middle class cis-gendered women in relatively secure employment. Low paid women in precarious jobs were much more likely to be working in sectors that had to shut down due the lockdown; women’s earnings were also disproportionately affected (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2020b). Black and Minority Ethnic women also experienced the greatest challenge balancing paid work and childcare (Women’s Budget Group, 2020) and were more at risk for health complications from COVID-19 (NHS Confederation, 2020).

The conflicts between work and home are by no means limited to women. Fathers have been largely absent in our reflections here, yet polls show that 1 in 3 UK fathers now feels closer to their children (ResponseSource, 2020). The lockdown has provided many fathers with the opportunity to more fully participate in their children’s formative years or to reconnect with older children (e.g., Sky News, 2020). Indeed, emerging research from The Fatherhood Institute (2020) shows that fathers are very positive about the additional gift of time with their children and want to produce this post-COVID-19. Campaigns such as Flex-for-All have (rightly) taken off. Where does that leave us as a society where we want to child-rear and work? Etelson (2007:1) notes,

“Mothers and their children would be better served by a feminist articulation of a real family values agenda that calls for society to support fathers and mothers engaged in the socially meaningful work of child-rearing”.

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