Exploring the Status of Female Roles After Childbirth Under the Ideology of Intensive Mothering

Xirui Sun[✉]

Beijing 101 High School, Beijing 100091, China
`23tina.sun@beijing101id.com`

Abstract. Because of the entrenched ideology of gender division of labor, intensive motherhood has become a challenge for both working and stay-at-home mothers, with the inevitable conflict between devoting themselves to caring for children and achieving their social values at work. This paper explores the issue of mothers' roles and corresponding impacts, which aids in promoting the advancement of the understanding and studies about mothering, offering theoretical foundations for formulating future policies. The current text analyzes 16 pieces of literature selected from the topic of intensive mothering, putting forward the conclusion that double identity has indeed created dilemmas for different types of mothers and social help is essential.

Keywords: Intensive mothering · Working mothers · Stay-at-home mother

1 Introduction

Due to the conventional gender roles that mothers undertake the main responsibility of tutoring and taking care of children, the identity of mothers is increasingly subjected to social expectations today. The concept of intensive mothering highlights the most severe restrictions in motherhood, which is females are passively shaped and defined to some extent. The research question of this article is to examine the status of female roles after childbirth under the ideology of intensive mothering, aiming to investigate the dual pressure and the limitation of mothers under the social devotion schema. This paper is conducive to providing theoretical basis for policy makers to consider how to encourage females to look for better self-development opportunities, understand their powers bestowed by motherhood, and recreate personal values. In the recent twenty years, studies about intensive mothering reveal that mothers are still leaders in childrearing though they have gained more working opportunities, and a majority of papers herein suggest the intensive parenting style poses a threat to women's physical as well as mental health. The deficiency in existing research is few solutions have been proposed. This paper takes "intensive mothering", "working mothers", and "stay-at-home mothers" as keywords, searching the articles from 2000 to now and sifting through, a total of 16 articles are included in the analysis range of this article. The specific classification can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Analysis of 16 Papers of Intensive Mothering

Number of papers	Different types of mothers	References
6	Working mothers	[1–6]
4	Family mothers	[7–10]

2 Different Types of Mothers

2.1 Working Mothers

Nowadays, females' labor participation rate is rising steadily due to the advancement of their educational level, and the traditional pattern of family division is gradually broken. An increasing number of women begins to provide financial support for their families and gain social values in workplaces as well as undertaking the major duty of home caring.

The "Breakdown Index" of Chinese Working Mothers published by Data lists six main reasons that why plenty of mothers choose to go back to work. In addition to economic pressure, 74.9 percent of working mothers pursue their career because they think it is crucial for women to attain financial independence; While other 71.3 percent of working mothers are back at work on account of the fear of out of contact with times; What's more, nearly 60 percent of working mothers believe that keep working is beneficial to maintain mental well-being and self-esteem [1]. From these data, it can be seen that a job is not only an approach for working mothers to share the financial burden for the family, but it is also an important mean to win over independent values and enhance self-identity. From a majority working mothers' perspective, having certain achievements in a specific field is more in line with the definition of a successful woman than simply having a happy family. They do not classify themselves as the roles who need to sacrifice for their families, but are still striving for own accomplishments. This is the reason why many working mothers persist in struggling in the workplace.

Nevertheless, double identity of office worker and mother is the main stressor of working mothers, and childbearing is indeed an obstacle to obtain fulfillment in their work; 53 percent of working mothers feel their have deficient energy and efficiency on working because of their children, while more than 75% of "working mothers" miss promotion opportunities and salary increase due to the discrimination against motherhood. The problem is not restricted to mothers who already have jobs, it also poses a threat on finding a job. Based on The Survey of Gender Equality Questionnaire of Zhaopin Ltd in 2022, 61.2 percent of females are asked about marital status and whether they have kids in job interviews, which is 5.4 percent higher than last year and almost twice as much as the number of males who are asked by these questions [2]. Overall, on account of the unfair treatment by employers, child bearing has become a principal impediment for many working mothers.

Furthermore, the younger generation's inclination of finding a job after becoming a mother is weaken. According to *2020 The Insight Report on the Group Behavior and Habits of Post-95 Mothers in China* published by iiMedia, even though the proportion of

stay-at-home mothers keeps declining, 21.8% of stay-at-home mothers who are surveyed are born after 1995, which is the highest ratio among mothers of all ages [3]. In other words, an increasingly number of young mothers are willing to take care of their children instead of looking for a job. The main reason of this phenomenon is the "Double penalty of gender and motherhood", which is a concept that put forward by Juhua Yang, refers to the unfair treatment and systematic expropriation encountered by females, including higher employment threshold, lower salary, less promotion and development opportunities, and uncertain future prospects. The "Double penalty"consists of two strands: one is the biological gender that directly lead to an unequal career starting point between men and women; The other one is maternity after childbirth, female's labor participation opportunities are relatively exploited from pregnancy to upbringing. The former factor is likely to trigger the latter, the latter reason is able to further aggravate these penalties [4].

Gender role is a series of psychological behavior patterns that society assigns to a particular gender in a certain situation. Cross-cultural research indicates that all cultural conventions assign different roles to men and women [5]. Typically, the family-devotion schema assumes that women are expected to find fulfillment in the intimacy of 'intensive motherhood', which means their devotion to family has to override all other commitments, and they should be accountable to childrearing and doing housework. Thus, for working mothers, there is bound to be a conflict between achieving accomplishment in career and fulfilling the family-devotion imperative [6]; Also owing to the traditional gender role still cannot be got rid of in modern society, working mothers take more responsibility than stay-at-home mothers because of double penalties coming from both family and workplace. As a result, when women have gained the employment right and started to improve the representation in workplace, they found that their family status is immovable, or as low as before, since their devotion such as chores and childcare is no longer meaningful as time passed by, while they still are not able to cast off the double identities that cause them to become more fatigued and stressful. Hence, a certain number of working mother would like to go back to family and be a stay-at-home mum.

2.2 Stay-At-Home Mothers

According to the theory of role, each person may possess two or more roles or identities, and when these identities are in opposition, the individual is experiencing role conflict. Females desire to have their own careers and to are forced to care of their children simultaneously as well as undertaking other social roles such as daughters and wives; In this case, role conflict brings them physical and mental struggle and exhaustion [7]. One of the solutions to this dilemma is to give up the identity of office workers and become a stay-at-home mother. Comparing to working mothers, the stay-at-home mother is more like a twenty-four seven service that always needs to accompany by children's side and provides continuous concern.

The ideology of gender consciousness leads many people to believe that motherhood is an intrinsic obligation of women. Under this social norm, childcare is regarded as a mother's responsibility, and the division of gender roles is highly rationalized constructing on the basis of the identity with maternity. "Fathers provide financial support while mothers contribute labor" seems to be a deep-seated gender division of labor whether

within or outside the family nowadays. Some feminists also use the Care Ethics of Carol Gilligan to interpret motherhood, which endorses that motherhood is an experience worth pursuing and women should always improve themselves based on childcare. Devoting to the family is not a burden, instead, the mindset and ability that women gain through motherhood are precious [8]. Under the patriarchal system, mothers become the responsible planner and supervisor of the children's growth. However, unless the occupation of father is fully flexible, the unequal time resources at the disposal of both parents has also become an objective reason why it is difficult to change the traditional gender division of labor in the family [9].

Being a stay-at-home mother also has several drawbacks. These mothers is at times isolated to their surroundings due to lack of interactions with adults, and the monotony of daily communications can be frustrated and depressive [10]. While the nonworking mother is staying at home to improve her children academically and emotionally, the amount of actual time is not always as sufficient as that of a working mother. They have to spend time on doing chores, picking up children, purchasing essentials for the family, and so on so forth.

In short, both the reproduction of gender roles and care ethics with moral connotations affect the identity of motherhood to various degrees.

3   Discussion

As the ideology of intensive motherhood is further disseminated, this intensity not only manifests in the time that a mother spends on her kids, but is also embodied in education owing to the intimidating involution nowadays. A good education is the most stable approach to maintaining their children's social status and avoiding downward mobility, especially in the middle-class, so providing a superior education begins to bond with motherhood, which means mothers have to take full responsibility for the success or failure of their next generation's study performances [11]. The exhaustive extension of maternal involvement in education further raises the standards of ideal motherhood; Apart from taking good care of children and cultivating the moral character of children, being able to tutor their studies has also turned into a fundamental mission of mothers, just like the concept of "supermom" created by the Western media in the post-industrial era [12]. With the increasing weight of education in maternity, the value of mothers is changing consequently. For example, The U.S. Department of Education said in its Research Report "education in Japan" that "when Japanese society evaluates a mother's achievements, it mainly refers to her child's academic result that also directly related to mums' personal honor and dignity, including family status" [13].

Furthermore, the core that generates infinite anxiety is unequal educational resources beneath the surface. The existence of an invisible market outside the normal education system leads to the issue of equity in education. Mothers' anxiety about losing at the start line in education through unfair competition is also a concern about the scarcity of opportunities for upward mobility. The anxiety caused by education is spreading in society. According to a survey conducted by People's Daily, 92.8% of the parents surveyed are anxious about their children's growth and education [14].

In this case, it is more necessary for ideal mothers to sacrifice themselves for their kids, including reorganizing their lives to pave the way for children to receive the best

education; Moving to other cities, looking for another job, or becoming stay-at-home mothers for teaching their children all seem to be common phenomena. After bringing up their children, females' values are dispelled more or less, which may result in declining opportunities for mothers to develop themselves. On the positive side, however, intensive mothering strengthens the connection between mothers and children and plays a role in building mutual-beneficial partnerships. For instance, since mothers devote more to children than to themselves, they may have a chance to have access to marvelous social resources, such as listening to famous operas or visiting some magnificent exhibitions [15].

To put it bluntly, involvement in children's education is a time-consuming task with ambiguous value, and the measure couples divide their leisure and labor time reflects gender relations. In reality, a majority of the time of mothers is occupied by childcare and dealing with kids' schoolwork, which inevitably hinders their career development and creates an impression that their time is relatively worthless, reproducing the unequal gender relations between husbands and wives based on the traditional gender division of labor [16].

4   Conclusion

Analyzing the literature on working mothers and stay-at-home mothers, this article finds that mothers inevitably get lost in self-abuse and anxiety under the double schema of ideal self-fulfillment and reaching social expectations, and the current drawbacks of intensive mothering seem to outweigh its advantages. In future studies, researchers should pay attention to the countermeasures to cope with this severe burden on mothers, and how to renew the concept of "women are only supposed to contribute themselves to their families" to alleviate gender inequality in dividing family roles.

References

1. T. Li, The "Breakdown Index" of Chinese Working Mothers, in: Data, 2019, pp. 38–45.
2. The Survey of Gender Equality Questionnaire of Zhaopin Ltd in 2022, 2022.
3. 2020 The Insight Report on the Group Behavior and Habits of Post-95 Mothers in China, iiMedia, 2020. https://www.iimedia.cn/c400/75024.html.
4. J. Yang, Double Penalty of Gender and Motherhood and Female Labor Force Participation, in: Population Research, vol. 43, 2019, pp. 36–51.
5. J. Wang, Inner Confusion of Young Stay-at-Home Mothers, in: China Youth Study, vol. 10, 2005, pp. 55–58. https://doi.org/10.19633/j.cnki.11-2579/d.2005.10.016.
6. I. Padavic, R.J. Ely, E.M. Reid, Explaining the persistence of gender inequality: The work–family narrative as a social defense against the 24/7 work culture, in: Administrative Science Quarterly, vol. 65, 2020, pp. 61–111. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839219832310
7. S. Song, Retreating back Home Willingly or Being Unwillingly Sent Home?--Debates on "Women-going-home" and the Ideological Transformation in the Course of Marketization in China, in: Journal of Chinese Women's Studies, 2011, pp. 5–12.
8. Y. Tao, Urban Women's Identity with Motherhood and Constructions of the Good Mother, in: Journal of Chinese Women's Studies, 2013, pp. 87–96. https://doi.org/10.3969/1004-2563.2013.06.017

9. K. Yang, Motherhood as Educational Agent: Changesin Motherhood in the Context of Market-Oriented Education, in: Education Science, 2018, pp. 79–90.
10. K.L. McIntosh, Working mothers vs stay at home mothers: the impact on children, in: Doctoral dissertation, Marietta college, 2006.
11. E. Lee, J. Bristow, C. Faircloth, et al., Parenting culture studies, Springer, 2014.
12. Y. Jin, D. Yang, Times of "Competing Mothers in Educational Field": The Popularity of Parenting and Reconstruction of Motherhood, in: Nanjing Journal of Social Sciences, 2015, pp. 61–67. https://doi.org/10.3969/1001-8263.2015.02.009
13. Z. Fu, Children's Preschool Education Starts at the Age of 1, in: Zaobao, 2014.
14. K. Mao, Education Equity is the Only Way to Alleviate Parents' Anxiety, in: People's Daily, 2014.
15. W Liu, The Difference in the Degree of Parents' Participation in Offspring's Education and its Influence, in: Forum on Contemporary Education, 2019, pp. 74–82. https://doi.org/10.13694/j.cnki.ddjylt.2019.03.010.
16. E. Murphy, Risk, Responsibility, and Rhetoric in Infant Feeding, in: Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, vol. 29, 2000, pp. 291–325.