

## **Working Mothers in Neoliberal Times**

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**Abstract:** Paid employment and motherhood have for so long appeared in everyday life as grounded in different logics. Here, the working mother presents an ideal juncture to explore the social and political order of neoliberalism. While state responses to mothers in the labour market have been uneven at best, the tendency has been to further privatise social goods, transferring responsibilities onto families as consumers. Moreover, shifting ideals around the meaning of paid employment and “the good mother” have intensified the work any mother must do to succeed in the social order, calling forth new subjectivities that re-instate class privileges. This paper will address these challenges, and further, explicate the relationship between contemporary motherhood and the market that are obscured by the reconfiguration of neoliberal policies and mentalities.

Perhaps one of the most straightforward sociological claims of the changes faced by western societies in the post 1970s era is that women have entered the labour market en masse. This claim needs clarification. Women have always worked; especially the working class, the unmarried, and women in occupations deemed suitable for female labour. The ‘change’ has been for married women, or more specifically for middle-class women, to return to the labour market after bearing children. Many of the now removed institutional barriers enabling women’s participation in the labour market can be attributed to the Australian women’s movement. However, this movement was followed shortly by a series of transformations in the labour market, including the expansion of immaterial labour, the demise of the family wage and the decentralisation of wage arbitration. Significantly, working mothers are over-represented in part-time work and so potentially more exposed to the inequalities resulting from these transformations. This paper gathers together theoretical literature to explore some of the contemporary challenges that working mothers encounter. The governance of working mothers, the re-articulation of the citizen-worker and the structural disadvantages of the labour market illustrate the uneven ground of neoliberalism in Australia. Furthermore, emergent ideologies of motherhood sit alongside contesting discourses with longer histories. These emerging ideals engender an intensification of motherhood, emotionally, and particularly economically and aesthetically. Working mothers are then rhetorically invited to balance these conflicts of work and life; however, the construction of this balance is only approximated with the privileges of social class. These conflicts are borne alone by individual mothers; this paper argues that motherhood and employment are tied

together in a way that mutually re-stabilises the model of mothers as primary carers through the re-privatisation of responsibility within the family, while facilitating the neoliberal agenda of transforming the labour market and engendering new subjectivities of the ideal mother-worker.

### **The governance of paid work**

The history of the governance of middle-class motherhood was for much of the 20th century firmly grounded in ideologies of maternalism, and bolstered institutionally through the family wage. Maternalism was a central plank of first-wave feminism, and the activities white mothers undertook in child rearing was recognised and supported by the welfare state as being in service of the nation (Lake, 1999; Blaxland, 2010:131). In the post 1970s era, mothers moving into paid employment have proved problematic for governments, and approaches have not been underpinned by any set of coherent principles regarding family policies, taxation or industrial relations. Consecutive Governments, on both sides of politics, have invested and disinvested in supporting mothers in paid employment, even while promulgating the deregulation of the labour market, equipping it with the capacity to make use of the labour. An instance of these incongruities was demonstrated recently when the Federal Government switched footing on Paid Parental Leave. Within two years, the Government moved from inciting ‘women of calibre’ (Aston & Swan, 2013) to reproduce, to accusing working mothers of ‘double-dipping’ workplace entitlements and the federally funded scheme to “rot” the system (Borello, 2015).

Social policies with the potential to support child-rearing and employment arrangements, such as childcare, health and education are increasingly marketised and privatised, shifting protecting of citizens from the market to exposing them more fully to it. The lack of affordable early childcare is the greatest barrier for mothers in the labour market, and the state response has been to provide tightly targeted provision to compensate poorer households to purchase services in the semi-private market (Spies-Butcher, 2014:193). Similarly, health and education have developed as policy domains characterised by inequity, essentially providing two-tiered services; one tier subsidising private providers, the other increasingly residualised and forced to compete for funding (Connell, 2015:103). Through state marketisation, citizens are discursively redeployed as consumers who make ‘choices’ to purchase services that apparently offer higher quality or status than state-run services. For the middle class, the state works by ‘acting at a distance’ (Rose, 1999:10), producing subjects who are able to mobilise their privileges and make particular choices regarding family and employment. These choices, in the context of this argument, are also bound up with parenting “correctly”; they are deeply embedded in the moral order of neoliberalism.

While there may well be public resistance to brazen privatisation, discourses of the citizen-as-consumer are increasingly expanding into previously protected spaces of everyday life, becoming, as Hall and O’Shea (2013:11) argue, a new kind of (neoliberal) common-sense’. The ability to make correct choices in the market is appealed to as an intrinsic quality, a virtue of entrepreneurialism. Such invocation obscures that ‘choice’ itself is a resource that is acquired by particular subjects whose lifestyle conforms to the normative order of neoliberalism (Leite, 2013:19). Over the last ten years, cuts to income support for lone parents and low-income families have actively sought to coerce women into paid employment through workfare programs when children are of school age, despite this being the period when all mothers tend to be underemployed (Blaxland, 2010; ABS, 2015). While workfare for low-income mothers has not been as aggressive as witnessed in the United States or the United Kingdom, such paternalistic measures are consistent within neoliberal policy reforms; for failed subjects at the bottom of the social order punitive approaches are taken to re-dress not only their labour market behaviour, but also their psychological shortcomings (Marston & McDonald, 2008:257-8). For lone or low-income mothers, this policy focus on their behaviours and psychological failings is nothing new,

however, such activation purports the narrowing scope of citizenship for mothers; whereby ‘the primary, if not the only obligation... is to be in paid employment’ (Yeatman, 2000:160).

Moreover, neoliberalism has reformulated the meaning of paid work; labouring in the market is no longer the means to the end, the process of labouring is the end in itself. Within this, a new citizen emerges, replacing the ‘contentment’ (Rose, 1999:113) model envisaged by the Keynesian welfare state that elaborated the duty to work within the schema of particular legal, civil and social rights and protections. Rose (1999:115-7) contends that through employment management, the new citizen-worker ‘self-actualises’. By deriving satisfaction through the alignment of their personal motivations and the business values of competition, innovation and flexibility, they become an entrepreneurial self (Rose, 1999:117). Undoubtedly, self-actualisation through employment is not an experience available in many occupations. However, Rose’s (1999:119) proposition articulates the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the techniques of governing the ‘productive subject’. Discourses that reinforce that not only should people be employed, but should feel a certain way about employment, effectively narrow what is considered a contribution to society (Young, 2002:57). While it may be idealistic to speak of meaningful or satisfying work for everyone, such an ideal can be used to critique jobs that are ‘socially wasteful, (and) even directly harmful in their effects’ (Young, 2002:48; see also Graeber, 2013). As Young (2002) and others (Graeber, 2013) argue, these shifts in how paid employment is constructed are particularly consequential for individuals with responsibilities as carers for children, the elderly or the disabled.

One of the more striking features of the Australian labour market is the prevalence of part-time employment for mothers and of full-time or longer hours for fathers, compared to their childfree counterparts (ABS, 2015). Since the 1980s, workplace restructuring has resulted in a ‘divide between core full-time hours-intensive positions and peripheral part-time and casual positions’ (van Gellecum et al, 2008:59). The historical horizontal segregation of the labour market in Australia continues to be deeply gendered for parents with dependents; men dominate in managerial and technician roles, and trades; women in community and personal services, clerical and administrative, and sales roles (ABS, 2015). The fact that most of these occupations performed by mothers in the labour market are the most subject to deregulation and decentralisation that has been integral to restructuring is only part of their make-up under neoliberalism (McDowell, 1991). The expansion of many of these occupations are also the response of neoliberalism to the entrance of women into the labour market, which erases ‘the dividing line between the transaction of labour in the market place and the transaction of services in the self’ (Cooper, 2014:32; see also Hochschild, 2003). Moreover, the power relations of employment are also obscured through privatisation, as individual contracts de-politicise the hierarchical social structure (Weeks, 2011:4). While employment is not made easy for mothers while their caring responsibilities are greatest, there are also cultural factors that shape the part-time participation rate of mothers.

### **The intensive ‘good mother’ and neoliberal femininities**

In Australia, mothers were once assigned to reproduce the colonial nation; now they are called to reproduce a particular subject fit for the social order of neoliberalism. Recent research on ‘the good mother’ elaborates how the dominant ideology of motherhood is reinforced within social institutions and arrangements and shapes and is shaped by the pressures that mothers reflexively place on their mothering practices (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010:2). The good mother is a social figure (Tyler, 2008:18); a figuration neither fixed nor stable, she is constantly modified within different cultural and historical settings (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010:1). Nonetheless, the characteristics of the good mother, her child-rearing expertise, her endless love, patience and empathy, constitute the regulatory boundaries for all mothers (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010:1).

One predominant mode of the good mother appears in the phenomenon of intensive mothering, 'that correct child rearing requires not only large amounts of money but also professional-level skills and copious amounts of physical, moral, mental, and emotional energy on the part of the individual mother' (Hays, 1996:4). Hochschild (2003:38) argues that this intensive ideological investment in motherhood is a response to the cultural and moral anxieties engendered by the encroaching market rationalities of neoliberalism that have thinned out wider social relations; Hays (1996:177) further argues that intensive mothering is an active resistance to these anxieties. Recent analysis has demonstrated that discourses of intensive parenting are extending to fathers and is no longer sharply marked by class distinctions (Craig et al, 2014:569). However, there is something more than responsiveness to children being articulated in the phenomenon of intensive mothering, it also perceives the needs of children through the lens of consumption and competition. In this way, the practicalities of intensive mothering require circumstances and material resources that are only available to particular subjects; motherhood continues to be a 'class act' (Fox, 2006:232). Added to this, mothers are also required to reproduce a "well-adjusted" self in the child (Lawler, 2000:56-7). Part of this project is future-oriented; producing particular subjectivities in children now will ensure they have the attributes that will later make them successful in the neoliberal labour market and therefore the social order (Weeks, 2011:7; Connell, 2008:185).

Neoliberalism is also re-signifying femininity in the cultural domain, such that it has sparked debate over the appropriation of feminism into the capitalist order (McRobbie, 2009; McRobbie, 2013; Fraser, 2013; Rottenberg, 2014). In this exchange, young women are positioned as empowered through the rhetoric of choice and freedom, albeit choices and freedoms that are hollowed out of their emancipatory promise through the de-politicising function of radical individualism (McRobbie, 2013:127; see also Brown, 2005). Contemporary motherhood is not exempt from these impulses; and new maternal identities and practices are emerging (Tyler, 2011:22). Lucrative markets have formed capitalising on maternal fashion, beauty and exercise regimes, and are consolidated in the image of the 'yummy mummy' (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010:70; Nash, 2012:169; Tyler & Baraitser, 2013:7). As McRobbie (2013:130) and others (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010; Tyler, 2011) argue, this celebrated and highly public version of the maternal 'is inextricably tied up with expansive norms of respectable middle-class life' which 'sets new horizons for... status on the basis of aspirational lifestyle'. The intensive self-governance that is required to fulfill such cultural and aesthetic aspirations, to reproduce a self that is capable of being legitimated through consumption, is simply not achievable for many mothers. So while there may be a time-conflict here between employment and motherhood for the middle-class, there is also arguably an overlap between the kinds of status attributed to particular forms of employment and to particular figurations of the good mother.

Regardless of class, the notion of 'the good mother' is being reformulated by maternal attachment to the labour market; it is not uncommon to hear that mothers who work are 'good' for the economy; fostering their own self-regard and satisfaction; and more recently, that maternal employment ameliorates gender inequalities in the next generation (McGinn et al, 2015). However, the cultural norms of motherhood and employment are underpinned by ideologies and values structured in tension, such that working mothers are 'interpellated simultaneously in contradictory ways' and 'become split subjects' (Fraser, 2013). Women as workers and carers are encouraged to manage these contradictions through the policy rhetoric of work/life balance. Given the prevalence of part-time maternal employment, participating this way in the labour market is evidently perceived as best facilitating the balance between care and employment.

### **Balance for whom?**

Work/life balance policies are the outcome of two related interests, government and employers (Eikhof et al, 2007:328). The concern for government is not quality of life for workers, simply that workers continue to reproduce new lives; for employers it is that they can arrange sufficient conditions to draw and keep employees attached to their businesses (Eikhof, 2007:328). Further, the work/life balance only pertains to paid employment and caring for dependents, it generally does not extend to childfree men and women in the labour market. As Connell (2005:378) elucidates, 'the radical impulse... for justice... gender equality... and for the fuller life made possible for everyone' is cleaved from the promise it invokes. Finally, and reiterating a theme already developed in this paper; who is the subject discursively produced in work/life balance rhetoric? The resources necessary for mothers to approximate a balance between employment and child rearing are manifold; a partner employed full-time, education, job security, a sympathetic employer, formal and informal childcare support, and the list goes on. For many middle class women the combination of employment and care is not only conceived of as achievable, but also an achievement of the modern woman (Vair, 2013). For many more mothers in Australia, a work/life balance under neoliberalism is closer to Berlant's (2011) articulation of 'cruel optimism'.

This paper has engaged with arguments that the conditions of the labour market lock women with caring responsibilities out of full-time work, or conversely, that women themselves choose to balance their commitments through part-time work. They are both accurate from different perspectives; however, from another perspective, that none of this should be conceived of as antagonistic. Since the wages for housework campaign and domestic labour debates of the 1970s (and continuing with research on social reproduction), the relationship and value of unpaid domestic labour and care from the standpoint of capital is made clear (Sandford, 2011). Providing shelter, food, and care for family members is the basic maintenance of daily life (Laslett & Brenner, 1989:382). Such work directly benefits the capitalist system by assuming private responsibility for the readying of workers for their labour to be appropriated as surplus by capitalists, while also reproducing the future labour force (see Dalla Costa and James, 1973; Federici, 1975). The wage relation between the family and the market is concealed by the discursive depoliticisation of the family; the family appears naturalised and bound by intimacy and reciprocity (Weeks, 2011:121). As Luxton (2006:26) argues, the duality of labour and work, of production and reproduction, 'fails to understand the family as both a set of economic relations and part of the economic workings of society'. Post-industrial shifts in production and the labour market, changes in gender relations, and the relocation of social reproduction have unsettled the straightforward dualism of men's relationship to production and women's relationship to reproduction (Adkins, 2008). Despite these challenges, women in Australia are still the primary workers of unpaid domestic labour; mothers on average spend half as much time in the labour market than fathers, more than twice as much time on childcare, and almost twice as much time doing domestic work, purchasing goods and services, and doing voluntary work and care (ABS, 2015).

Neoliberal economics and neoliberal governmentality occupy a contested space in the Australian social imaginary, sitting alongside a range of discourses that restrict or enable the adaption of neoliberalism as a local variant, creating a hybrid composition as it does in other wealthy Anglophone countries. While mothers are increasingly drawn into the labour market, intensive mothering reestablishes women as primary carers of children. Rather than perpetuating the argument that these demands between childcare, housework and paid employment are irreconcilable, or less helpful, reconcilable only in a way that further entrenches women as primary carers and part-time employees, a critical understanding is needed of how these activities mutually reinforce the processes of establishing the normative order of neoliberalism. The intensification of mothering coincides with the interests of a state seeking to re-privatise social reproduction. The rhetoric of flexibility in employment permits mothers to participate in the labour market by their

own choosing, in a labour market that is increasingly inclined towards casualisation and precarity. That paid employment is displacing other means of being socially intelligible is the challenge that neoliberalism animates in the lives of contemporary mothers in Australia.

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