

Unprecedented Times?: Analyzing the Experiences of Mothers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Using a Disaster Sociology Framework

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INTRODUCTION

On July 2nd, 2020, Dr. Anthony Fauci, White House health advisor and director of the National Institutes of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, “We’re in an unprecedented pandemic. We haven’t seen anything like this for the last 102 years in 1918, and this is something that we need to take very seriously because there’s so many implications of it” (Higgins-Dunn 2020). This statement came approximately three months after stay-at-home directives were issued, American schools were moved online, and many American workers adjusted to virtual workplaces. ‘Unprecedented’ has oft been used to describe the COVID-19 pandemic; the lines between school, home, and work are blurred during a time of collective trauma and suffering on a global scale. In central New York and throughout the country, parents of young children have borne the brunt of at-home learning, abruptly adopting teaching roles that often conflict with their paid employment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is not entirely unprecedented.

In this paper, I analyze the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a sample of primarily white central New York mothers using a disaster sociology framework. I primarily draw comparisons between existing literature on natural disasters and health crises and experiences of the mothers of young children navigating at-home schooling. I focus on the myriad ways the pandemic has affected the family unit and all those in it in ways comparable to other disasters. As such, my paper is organized around two guiding research questions:

- 1.) How do the experiences of mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic compare to those of women in other disaster scenarios?

- 2.) Solely utilizing a disaster sociology framework, what pre-existing social conditions are exacerbated by COVID-19 stay-at-home directives and at-home schooling?

Though organized around these two general questions, the analysis inevitably blends together as these questions are inextricably linked. For example, the inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19 may affect mothers in ways similar to women in other disasters. All in all, this paper essentially critiques Dr. Fauci's statement (above). I argue that this pandemic is not entirely unprecedented and that valuable insights into the experiences of families during the COVID-19 pandemic can be drawn from existing disaster literature. However, in concert with Dr. Fauci, I argue that *'this is something that we need to take very seriously because there's so many implications of it'* (Fauci 2020) (emphasis added).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Disaster Sociology

In the field of disaster sociology, disasters are widely defined as unpredictable, catastrophic events that can impact an individual's life significantly (Botey & Kulig 2013). As such, numerous sociologists (Rinaldo and Whalen 2020; Yavorsky et al. 2021) have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic must be analyzed as a disaster, not only because of the catastrophically high death and unemployment rates, but also because of the oft hidden impact of this job loss and/or stay-at-home directives on vulnerable populations (Collins et al. 2020; Yavorsky et al. 2021). In the absence of extensive literature on health crises in the 20th and 21st centuries, one can look to other disasters to understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning that many social phenomena exposed by the pandemic are not unprecedented incidents but

predictable occurrences. Though the conditions of COVID-19 vary notably from other disasters in their prolonged and ongoing nature, key insights can be gleaned from natural disasters in the general toll they take on women and, more specifically, mothers. This distinction being held in mind, the effect that COVID-19 has had on mothers due to existing inequalities in care-work bears resemblance to other natural disasters.

DISASTER SOCIOLOGY FRAMEWORKS

In his book on the sociological implications of the 1995 Chicago heatwave, Eric Klinenberg writes:

The weather, in other words, accounts for only part of the human devastation that arose from the Chicago heat wave.... The 1995 heat wave was a social drama that played out and made visible a series of conditions that are always present but difficult to perceive (pages 10-11).

This excerpt encapsulates perhaps the most salient tenet in disaster sociology – *because disasters inherently have social dimensions, disasters do not create inequalities; they make visible preexisting ones*. Furthermore, Thomas E. Drabek (2005) argues that in the sociological study of disaster, the actual disaster is merely a precipitous event that reveal human conditions. Within the field of disaster sociology, scholars employ a variety of frameworks. Enarson et al. (2006) argue that the social vulnerability framework, which states that disaster risk is socially distributed in ways reflective of pre-existing social conditions, is the most effective framework when analyzing gender and disaster. Put simply, social vulnerability before, during, and after a catastrophic event is the outcome of a social dynamic rooted in gender, class, race, culture, age,

etc. (Enarson et al. 2006: 130). This approach, though useful, is contested and must be used critically; used uncarefully, one may homogenize women and overemphasize their dependency/need. However, used critically, this framework is invaluable in its ability to point to the structural sources of gender-based vulnerability. As such, it is the framework I employ in this research.

Gender is a fundamental organizing principle of modern society. As such, Enarson et al. (2006) argue that understating the importance of gender in disaster research may lead to the denial of women's fundamental rights (130). In this vein, numerous sociologists have found that women are particularly vulnerable in times of disaster, often because of the gendered division of labor and societal expectations that mothers perform care-work (Hyndman 2008; Frankenberg et al. 2008; Weitzman and Behrman 2016). A review of disaster literature reveals that mothers are vulnerable in times of disaster in three primary categories:

Economic (loss of livelihood, capital, etc.)

Physical (loss of life, domestic violence, higher rate of injury, etc.)

Emotional (mental health concerns, emotion work, etc.)

Though ranging in nature and outcome, none of these impacts should be understated or written off as unimportant; all have the potential to create persistent, long-term consequences (Collins et al. 2020; Yavorsky et al. 2021).

Women have been rendered physically and emotionally vulnerable to numerous natural disasters. In their research on Intimate Partner Violence in Haiti, Abigail Weitzman and Julia Andrea Behrman (2016) found that the 2010 Haitian Earthquake and subsequent Cholera

outbreak had a profound impact on intra-household dynamics at the expense of women. Those living in areas devastated by the Earthquake, especially those who had lost a relative, had a higher chance of being exposed to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) than they would had the Earthquake not occurred *and* in comparison to those living in areas not devastated by the earthquake. Similarly, Frankenberg et al. (2008) found that Post Traumatic Stress Reactivity rates were highest for women living in areas highly devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami due to their performing childcare, thus being responsible for their children's wellbeing when the tsunami hit. Hyndman (2008) found that, in Sri Lanka, a country also devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean Boxing Day Tsunami, women were more likely to be working in coastal village markets on the Sunday that the tsunami struck, rendering particularly vulnerable to the disaster. In studying another type of physical disaster, Reid & Reczek (2011) found that mothers in families displaced by Hurricane Katrina, rather than fathers or children, had to actively promote family unity after the disaster, straining their mental health. All in all, women are particularly vulnerable physically and emotionally during catastrophic natural disasters, an effect that may be replicated by women in this study.

The gendered implications of disaster extend far beyond the risk of bodily or mental harm -- disasters also have profound economic consequences for women. Weitzman and Berman (2016, see above) also point to the economic implications of disaster on women, arguing that the Haitian Earthquake led to a decrease in women's resources, making them more dependent on abusive partners and undermining ability to wield power in their relationship. Hyndman (2008) found that women disproportionately lost their wealth, like bikes and gold jewelry, in the tsunami. This loss of financial capital is like that experienced by women during the COVID-19

pandemic; during the recent economic reopening, women lagged behind men in terms of employment, with only 43% of jobs added in Sept. 2020 being earned by women despite their higher level of job loss (Collins et al. 2020). Women have also been more likely to experience job loss due to their overrepresentation in the high contact service sector (Yavorsky et al. 2021). Collins et al. (2020) argue that the soaring unemployment rates during the COVID-19 pandemic have been partly caused by daycare and school closures, disproportionately pushing women out of the workforce or leading to women disproportionately reducing their work hours in order to care for children and oversee their schooling, hurting economic mobility (Collins et al. 2020). In addition, scholars find women have experienced negative emotions and feelings of unfairness as a result of completing more housework and having less personal time than male spouses during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to relationship strain, distress and resentment (Craig and Churchill 2020; Waddell et al 2021). Clearly women are rendered particularly economically and emotionally vulnerable by disasters, with the COVID-19 disaster subscribing to this pattern.

The Economic and Domestic Gender Division of Labor

The gender division of labor is a well-documented sociological phenomenon that refers to both the inequitable division of unpaid labor between men and women within the home, including house- and care-work, and the inequitable division of paid labor. In a transnational study of women's employment, Boeckmann et al. (2015) found that gendered cultural norms, childcare, and leave policies combine to push women out of the workforce at a higher rate than men. They argue that welfare states reproduce cultural norms of *what* good care is and *who* should provide it by embedding these norms in childcare and leave policies making motherhood itself is an axis of inequality that drives women's employment patterns more saliently than

simply gender. Likewise, Caitlyn Collins (2019) found that employed mothers are trapped between intensive employee models, which dictate that they should be entirely devoted to their job, and intensive motherhood models, which dictate that they should be entirely devoted to their children (see Lois 2006). To mitigate these conflicts, women often leave the workplace or transition into parttime work. These structural forces, informed by cultural norms of ‘good’ motherhood, contribute to a negative perception of mothers as fickle and uncommitted in the eyes of employers.

Women’s employment, however, cannot only be understood by these structural factors – these ideologies regarding gender values and divisions of labor are internalized by individuals and present *within* the home. Dempsey (2000) found that, due to these inequitable structural forces outlined above, men have more definitional power in heterosexual marriages, allowing them to define norms, ideals, and values that regulate their relationship. Men’s cultural and institutional privilege grants them access to material goods, services from others, higher paying and more status-conferring jobs, educational opportunities, and personal autonomy. In comparison, women’s jobs are less well paying and attract less social status than men, granting men more power to define norms in a relationship. Dempsey found that men often cited biological differences or religious reasons, signifying gender ideologies, to justify these imbalances in care, chores, and recreational time. Similarly, in a unique comparative analysis of parenting magazine articles between the 1980s and the early 2000s, Wall (2013) found that an added emphasis has been placed on work-family conflict in the 21st century. Whereas women’s employment was once talked of as contributing to society, dominant discourse now perceives it in a negative light, suggesting paid work separates a mother from her family to the detriment of

children. The ideology of intensive mothering in which mothers must invest in their kids regardless of how this impacts mental health or job performance, undergirds this research. The mother is considered the safety net that prepares her child to competitively contribute in a neoliberal society, regardless of how this impacts her wellbeing (Wall 2013).

Clearly, this inequitable division of labor persists even when mothers are engaged in paid labor. Damaske (2013) argues that there is a moral association between working motherhood and selfishness, with mothers who engage in paid work being shamed. As showcased by these three studies, working mothers face structural and cultural barriers that limit their employment and dictate their division of time.

Iniquity is also seen through analysis of time diaries. For example, Bianchi et al. (2009) found that focal mothers (mothers of young children employed full time in paid labor) shoulder most unpaid labor in the home, sometimes at the expense of performance in the labor market. These mothers completed an additional 13-15 hours a week of unpaid labor, a 'second shift' of labor (see Hochschild 1989) while enjoying seven less hours of recreational time than their husbands. As exhibited by these studies, white, class-advantaged women are continually pushed out of the workforce and made to bear an uneven distribution of unpaid work at home. Even when women are involved in the paid labor market, it is their job to mitigate the work-family conflict that arises from cultural perceptions of good motherhood and the policies that oppose any reconciliation of 'good' motherhood and 'good' employment.

The COVID-19 Division of Labor

Two of the inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic have certainly been the domestic and paid divisions of labor. In their pre- and post-lockdown longitudinal study of the household division of labor in dual-earner families with children, Craig and Churchill (2020) found that mothers' increase in domestic labor occurred at a higher rate than their partners, contributing to perceptions of unfairness and feelings of dissatisfaction in women. In another empirical study that illustrates how women's paid work hours have been disproportionately affected by telecommuting and stay-at-home directives, Collins et al. (2020) found that mothers of young children working from home lost 2.6 work hours per week while their husbands lost only thirty minutes. Contrary to what some sociologists (Miller 2020; Schulte 2020; see Collins et al. 2020) have argued, exposure to unpaid labor did not lead to a substantial increase in men's participation in domestic labor (Collins et al. 2020). They also argue that the decrease in mother's work hours to care for children and their schooling may lead to perceptions of women as uncommitted, undoing marginal improvements in the paid division of labor after the pandemic. Rinaldo and Whalen (2020) found that, in telecommuting families, husbands' jobs were prioritized and women's domestic labor increased at the expense of their mental health. Mothers who could telecommute often multitasked to care for children and men's jobs were treated more seriously by children when both parents were working from home, leading mothers to be interrupted by children while working. These are not new phenomena, however, but exacerbated conditions from before the pandemic. In fact, Rinaldo and Whalen (2020) found that families committed to gender equity prior to the pandemic were more likely to actively promote an equitable household division of labor. In these households, mothers reported higher degrees of satisfaction. In sum, pre-pandemic factors play a significant role in the division of labor in the

home/workplace as well as the emotional health of women during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic conditions, per a disaster sociology framework, are exacerbated by the unprecedented conditions characteristic of stay-at-home directives.

Mothers' Emotion Work

To deal with the unfavorable emotions that arise from the gender division of labor, mothers often engage in emotion work, a term coined by Arlie Hochschild (1979). Emotion work is the process of actively attempting to alter emotions in degree or quality into feelings that are more socially acceptable or favorable. Furthermore, Hochschild posits that, because humans live in a social theater, this emotion work is guided by dominant ideologies (ex. The intensive mothering ideology). In an study centered on homeschooling mothers, Jennifer Lois (2010) found that mothers engaged in temporal emotion work to mitigate negative emotions that arose from lack of personal time and extensive school- and care-work. Lois argued that mothers who had tried and failed to get help from husbands or carve out personal time for themselves resorted to altering their subjective experience of time to alter their emotions. For example, mothers who described being burnt out would rely on savoring time with their children or fear of future regret to mitigate negative emotions associated with homeschooling their children. This emotion work occurred in mothers who had subscribed to and were operating within the ideology of intensive mothering (Lois 2006;2010).

Like the mothers in Lois's (2010) study, mothers have had to adopt the role of schoolteacher and full-time caretaker during the COVID-19 pandemic, blurring the lines between work, care-work, and personal time (Collins et al. 2020; Rinaldo & Whalen 2020; Yavorsky et al.

2021). As such, it is valuable to understand how mothers employ emotional strategies while negotiating these new at-home conditions underneath a dominant intensive mothering ideology that demands they devote time and resources indiscriminately to their child, regardless of the personal toll.

METHODS

This project is based on a longitudinal qualitative study conducted by our Primary Investigator and research team (seven students) with support from the Levitt Center at Hamilton College. The PI received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Hamilton College prior to beginning the study. Respondents from five districts in a central New York county were interviewed. These districts, labeled Dayton, Fairview, Greenville, Harrisburg, and Springfield (all pseudonyms), had varying geographic and demographic characteristics. The districts include rural areas, small towns, and large urban areas. Data was collected over three periods; Summer 2020, Winter 2020/1, and Summer 2021. Nineteen respondents were interviewed from June to July 2020 and 34 were interviewed in the fall of 2020 and the winter of 2021. In June and July 2021, 18 respondents who had been interviewed in Summer 2020 or Winter 2020/1 completed a follow-up interview.

All respondents had at least one child that was in 3rd, 4th, or 5th grade at the time of the first interview. The respondents were originally recruited by the team through flyers and emails that outlined the study and provided contact information for the PI.. Information for the study was also distributed by relevant groups in the area, including employers, schools, and community organizations. Respondents were instructed to complete an online survey that collected

demographic information and asked initial questions about the respondent's experience with at-home learning. The respondent then indicated whether they'd be willing to participate in a virtual interview conducted via Zoom, Facetime, telephone, or other virtual means. Upon confirming their interest, the respondents were sent a scheduling email by a student researcher that included a virtual informed consent form which they were instructed to complete and submit via email/phone.

Phases 1 and 2:

Once informed consent forms were completed and interviews scheduled, respondents took part in an approximately thirty-minute-long interview facilitated by a research assistant or the PI. The research team used an interview guide with questions that asked about at-home schooling, extracurricular involvement, interaction with family/friends, and parenting in regard to race/social class (only in winter 2020/1) and then used probe-questions to ask follow-up questions. Upon receiving verbal consent from respondents, interviews were recorded using a variety of digital recording software. Respondents were informed that they could decline to answer questions or end the interview at any time. Upon completion, interviewees received a \$30.00 VISA gift card as a token of gratitude for their participation.

Phase 3:

For follow-up interviews, the PI emailed respondents requesting their completion of a survey similar to the one administered previously. This survey asked respondents demographic questions regarding employment as well as temporal questions in relation to their family's experience with education since the first interview was conducted. Respondents were again

asked to indicate whether they'd be willing to complete a 30-minute interview. If they were, they were contacted via email to schedule an interview and were instructed to complete and sign the informed consent form. Interviews again lasted approximately thirty minutes. Upon completion, interviewees received a \$50.00 VISA gift card as a token of gratitude for their participation. Interviews were transcribed by Rev.com and uploaded to the digital coding software Dedoose. Interviews were coded according to a codebook created and refined by the research team. All research assistants coded one transcript and compared codes to ensure intercoder reliability. After intercoder reliability was ensured, transcripts were coded independently.

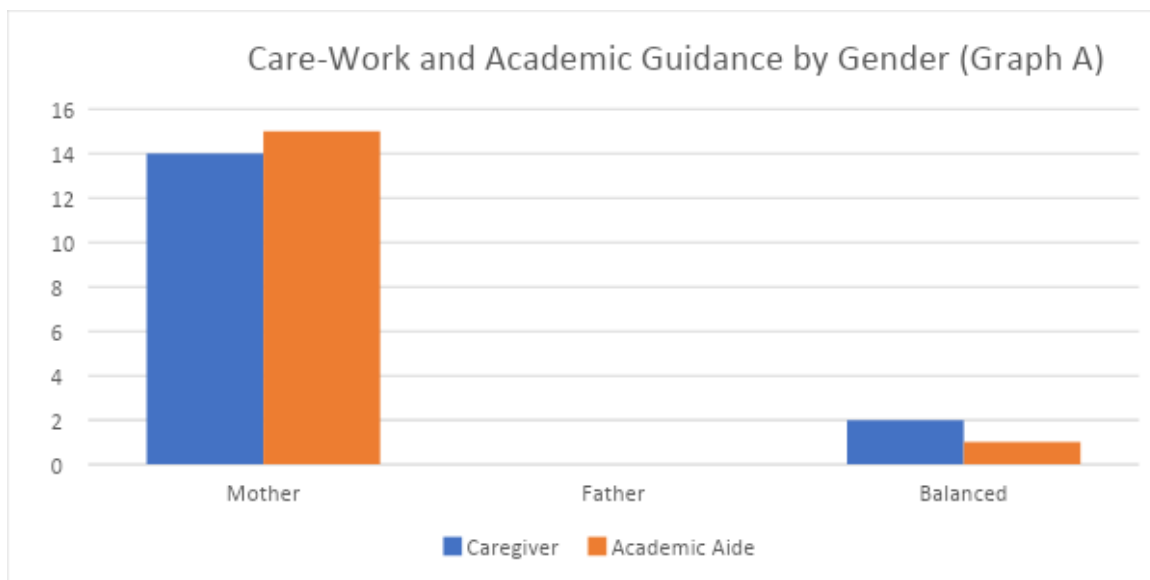
Data:

In this paper, I use longitudinal data of respondents interviewed twice. To analyze the long-term effects of the pandemic on mothers, I analyze the follow-up interviews of 16 respondents in depth. To analyze the traditional gender division of labor from the mother's point of view, I include only mothers in heterosexual relationships. Two respondents are excluded from analysis, one father and one single mother. So that I can ensure I'm telling the full story of each respondent, I cross referenced the original interview of every respondent. For example, for respondents that did not make it clear which parent provided care during the pandemic in the follow-up interview, I referenced their original interview. However, as stated previously, this analysis is primarily concerned with their follow-up interviews. Each respondent had at least one child in 3rd, 4th, or 5th grade at the time of their first interview. This sample of respondents is primarily white (15 identify as white, one identifies as Black), but is class diverse based on reported financial information (nine are less advantaged, seven are more advantaged).

FINDINGS

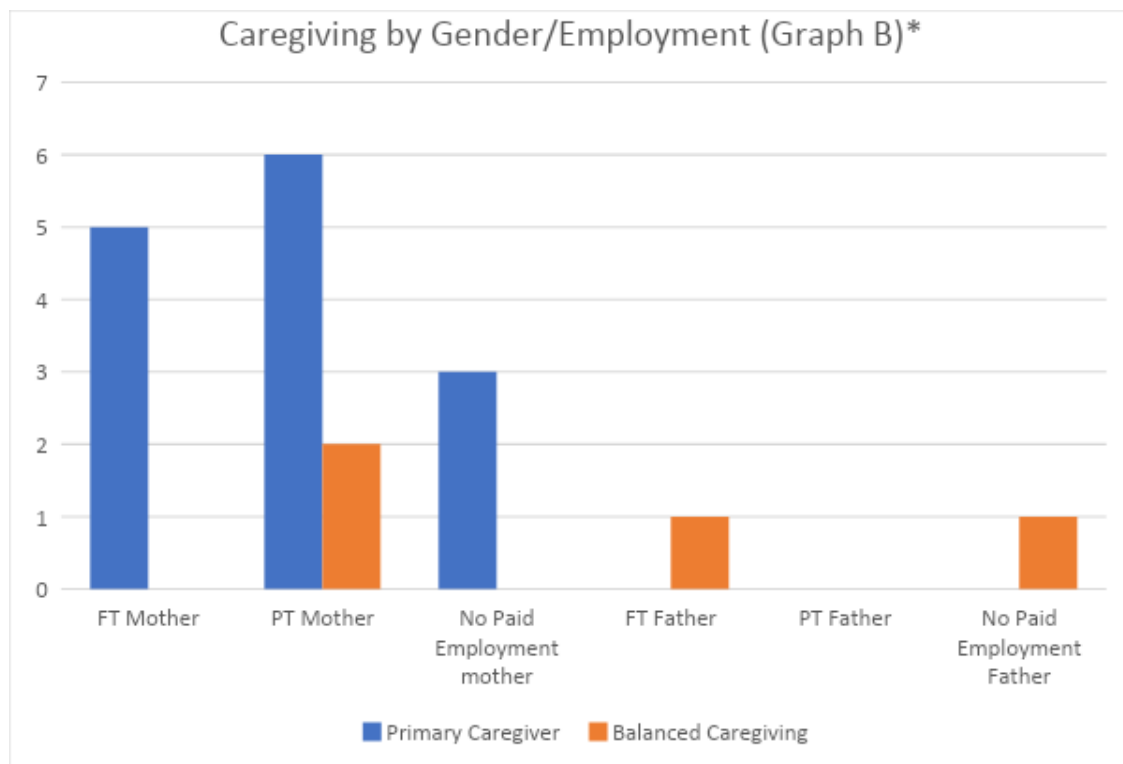
Care Work and Academic Guidance Disparities

Consistent with literature concerning the gendered domestic division of labor (Bianchi et al. 2009; Boeckmann et al. 2015; Collins 2019; Waddell et al. 2020), mothers bore the brunt of at-home learning in multiple ways. This disproportionate division of at-home labor led to numerous negative emotions and strategies employed to negate these emotions.



As seen in the above graph, mothers disproportionately facilitated their child(ren)'s at-home learning. 15 of 16 mothers reported being their child's primary academic aide, meaning they either actively assisted their children with schoolwork or supervised their children while they completed at-home school. Notably, one father not included in this analysis (see methods) reported being the primary academic aide and caregiver due to work flexibility. Only one respondent reported that her and her partner assisted their children with online school equally,

whereas no respondents reported their husband being the primary academic aide. In addition to disproportionately facilitating their children's school, 14 of 16 mothers acted as primary caregiver for their children, while two respondents reported that them and their spouse split the duty. A parent was considered a primary caregiver if they described performing active care (hands on activities like bathing, feeding, dressing, teaching, playing, soothing, etc.) and supervisory care (not interacting w/ person being cared for but still on call if needed, would need someone else to fill in if you left) at a higher rate than their partner (Craig & Churchill 2020). Furthermore, employment status did not have a significant impact on whether the mother or father handled at-home learning and care-work; that is to say, the lower rate of fathers handling these tasks was not significantly linked to their or the respondent's employment status.



** The two mothers engaging in balanced care-work are married to the two men engaging in balanced care-work*

As this graph clearly shows, mothers were disproportionately performing this unpaid labor regardless of employment status. Furthermore, as the below table emphasizes, fathers were *never* the primary caregiver or academic aide, *even if* they had no paid employment and their wives were employed. Put simply, mothers were not just performing this unpaid labor because they were available but were instead often performing a second shift of labor (Bianchi et al. 2009; Collins 2019). This is in concert with Boeckmann et al.'s (2009) finding that women in heterosexual relationships in which both partners work full-time jobs are more likely to perform domestic labor than their partner. This may be because care-work, domestic labor, and homeschooling, per traditional gender ideology, are considered the mother's job (Dempsey 2000; Wall 2013). These disparities may also be explained by Dempsey's (2000) finding regarding definitional power. Dempsey found that men wield definitional power, the ability to define norms, ideals, and values regulating the relationship, in a relationship due to institutional forces that secure them higher-paying and status conferring jobs and traditional gender ideologies, which state that men and women inherently occupy different spheres, with women occupying the 'domestic labor sphere.' Thus, men have more power to allocate which partner performs unpaid domestic labor.

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Primary Academic Aid</i>	<i>Primary Caregiver</i>	<i>Respondent Employment</i>	<i>Partner Employment</i>
Janine	Mother	Mother	Full Time	No Paid Employment
Lydia	Mother	Balanced	Part Time	No Paid Employment
Brenda	Mother	Mother	No Paid Employment	Full Time
Melissa	Mother	Mother	No Paid Employment	Full Time

Based on the above data, it's undeniable that women perform more domestic unpaid labor than men. This pattern persisting in COVID times has already been well documented (Collins et al. 2020; Craig & Churchill 2020; Rinaldo & Whalen 2020). Indeed, it's clear that a pre-pandemic social condition has been exacerbated and made visible, as would be predicted by a disaster sociology framework. But, how do the experiences of women compare to those of women in times of other disasters? What is the impact of this division of labor emotionally?

While managing at-home learning and providing care to their children, respondents reported performing myriad duties, including comforting children after technological socialization conflicts like ignored friend requests, facilitating their children's learning, completing housework, and managing extracurriculars/their child's free time at a rate higher than their partners. These tasks, particularly managing children's free time and facilitating their children's learning, came at the expense of their mental health.

One such case is Mary, a mother of two elementary aged children and a professor on sabbatical who was her children's primary learning facilitator and caregiver during the pandemic. Tellingly, Mary described at-home learning as a 'black pit.' Although Mary was supposed to do research while on sabbatical, she described only being able to engage in her work once her children returned to school for two days a week and, even then, the work completed was minimal. She explained that it was important to at-home learning so that her husband, also a professor, could devote his time to his job, perhaps suggesting that she considered his work more important than her own. Again, this is in line with Dempsey's (2000) finding that domestic labor is oft considered inherently the mother's job, naturalizing these inequities. Although Mary was supposed to return to work a few months into the pandemic, she was unable due to a lack of

childcare. Because of this, instead of teaching a summer class, she created an intricate summer camp for her children. She used the language of “juggling” when she reflected on the pandemic and at-home learning, explaining that she only felt “mentally sane” when she could finally return to work. For Mary, as is exemplified by her comparing online schooling to a ‘black pit’, at-home learning was a primary stressor during COVID-19, a sentiment expressed by many other mothers.

Like Mary, many mothers experienced negative emotions as a result of handling their children’s at-home learning, illuminating the disproportionate toll stay-at-home directives and online schooling took on mothers. For Megan, online schooling took a toll on her not just in its time demands and difficulty, but also for what she felt it said about *her* as a parent:

[I felt like] such a parental failure. Despite everyone saying, "Everyone's going through this, it's not just you," getting their grades at the end of the year was like, what happened? I really dropped the ball, I should have had a better plan or something. I thought I would be better at it, I thought I would be more resilient, *but it just felt so overwhelming just trying to manage all of that.* (Emphasis added)

Although Megan acknowledges that online schooling is overwhelming, she still admits that her perception of herself has been diminished by her children’s educational outcomes. This feeling of failure may relate to Megan’s conceptualization of herself as a mother. In Lois’ study on the ideology of intensive mothering, mothers were expected to be the primary caregivers of a family, consider their children priceless, and use labor intensive, financially expensive, emotionally laborious childrearing methods (2010:422). Although this demanding model of motherhood is unattainable to most mothers due to the level of sacrifice it requires, it is

nonetheless a standard by which mothers judge themselves and are judged by others (Lois 2010). Thus, at-home learning is another arena in which mothers must fulfill the impossible demands of intensive motherhood. The inability to do so, like Megan's perceived failures, can lead to distress. For example, Brenda, the mother and primary caregiver of an elementary aged child, expressed that she felt guilty for not 'going with the flow of online learning,' ashamed that she struggled so much with the transition. Like Megan, inability to fulfill intensive motherhood standards led to undue distress and guilt, highlighting the emotional burden mothers bear during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of added responsibilities.

Some mothers exhibited role strain, feeling like they had to fulfill every one of their roles to its fullest potential, per the tenets of intensive motherhood, without any personal time (Lois 2006; 2010). Andrea, a teacher and mother of two school-age children, encapsulates this burden while talking about her experiences:

For my part, it was a challenge because I never got a break... It was sometimes the burnout of playing all of the roles that year of parent, and teacher, and everything in between that was stressful for me sometimes, for sure.

Mothers working paid jobs from home performed double days of work, blurring the boundaries between unpaid and paid labor. These blurred boundaries led to stress and frustration in mothers. Laura, a high school teacher and mother of three school-aged children, found herself working sixteen hour days between navigating her remote teaching job *and* facilitating her children's at-home learning. In the first few months of the pandemic, Laura expressed feeling "tired and stressed out" from modulating between these two tasks. Her daughter, who struggled

academically, required extra help. As such, Laura took her daughter's education into her own hands. Without help from her partner or the school district, Laura expressed that her daughter and her would often end schooldays "in tears." Regarding these double days of teaching, Laura said, "... It was stressful. I'm tired. I don't want to [teach my daughter] after working 10 or 12 hours, you know?" Her husband, who worked full-time in-person as the manager of a company, did not contribute to schoolwork or care-work. Marianne, a professional working from home, found that her job did not hold the same weight as her husband's. She expressed that her children did not understand that she was working, explaining " , [my children] also find it hard to draw that line. Just because I'm here, I have to remind them all day long, 'I'm working right now,' you know?" On top of supervising her children's school, Marianne had to constantly remind her children that she could not be interrupted as she was working. This can be explained by Rinaldo and Whalen's (2021) finding that, in families in which both parents telecommute during the COVID-19 pandemic, men's jobs are more often prioritized or seen as more important. As such, mothers are more likely than fathers to be interrupted while working at home. Similarly, mothers are more likely to reduce their hours or multi-task, at the expense of job performance, to handle at-home learning, made obvious by Laura's dilemma. Illustrating this tension, Megan explained, "My husband's job required quiet... it was definitely he had his job and then I had the rest. Keeping that balance was definitely on me." Not only was her husband's financial job prioritized over her part-time job, but all other household tasks *and* the responsibility of ensuring her husband had quiet to focus on his job fell to Megan. Mothers took on extra responsibility to ensure that their partner's jobs were respected and their children attended school at home at the expense of their own jobs. In line with Bianchi et al.'s (2009) findings, if their job performance

did not suffer and mothers put in exhausting double days to ‘balance’ both tasks, their mental health suffered instead.

As seen in the Graph B, most mothers expressed serving as the primary caregiver and academic aide during the pandemic regardless of their husband’s employment situation. For some, this unequal division of labor came with frustration. For example, Barbara expressed frustration that her children always defaulted to asking her, rather than her husband, questions and felt the burden of having to handle her child’s emotions when they arose. By contrast, Janine, explained that, although her husband had no paid employment, she was the one that handled at-home schooling and care-work of their three children as she also worked from home. However, Janine never expressed negative emotions with this disproportionate division of labor and instead expressed immense gratitude, which will be discussed in another section.

In sum, mothers bore the brunt of care-work and at-home learning, often at the expense of their own mental health. Respondents reported feeling burnt out, stressed, and frustrated because of this disproportionate division of labor. Mothers also reported performing this care-work/teaching at the expense of their job performance. Except for one mother, whose husband had retired shortly before the pandemic, mothers handled at-home learning regardless of their employment status, as is illustrated by Janine, who took on the learning responsibilities despite working more than her husband. As is evident in disaster literature (Frankenberg et al. 2008; Reid and Reczek 2011; Weitzman and Behrman 2016; Hyndman 2008; Enarson et al. 2006), care-work and the gendered division of labor rendered respondents particularly burdened by the pandemic. In the following sections, I provide possible explanations for this pattern.

IS HIS JOB MORE IMPORTANT?: GENDERED EMPLOYMENT SHIFTS AND CARE-WORK

Graph B does not capture the number of mothers who experienced employment changes because of lack of childcare catalyzed by the pandemic. Four mothers reported changes in employment to take care of children and manage their at-home learning. Brenda, a mother of one elementary aged child, explained that she recently was employed at a contact tracing job. She reported that this job was one that she was good at and enjoyed immensely. However, she explained that she left this position when her son's school shut down due to a lack of childcare. However, Brenda reported that this was not the first time that she had to leave a job to provide childcare for her son:

So I'm definitely not working. Because I'm just going to not work until he's in kindergarten, *because that's just what seems to happen. Every time I tried to get a position, something happens with childcare and then I end up having to leave.* I'm just going to wait until he's in school full time, I think. (Emphasis added)

Brenda's explanation for why it was her and not her husband that reduced their work hours to provide care for their children is nondescript – according to Brenda, it's “just what seems to happen.” In comparative research with middle-class mothers across countries, Collins (2019) finds that in the United States, minimal benefits, low commitment to public caregiving, a high gender wage gap, lack of federally mandated maternity leave, and minimal child-support policies for employers combine to make motherhood and employment extremely difficult to reconcile, forcing women to work a second shift if they wish to be employed. Gender regimes,

Collins argues, lead to legislation and intra-family dynamics that implicitly state who should be caring for children – mothers (Collins 2019: 1-9). Perhaps this is gender regime is behind Brenda's justification that women leaving work for children is 'just what seems to happen.' Later in the interview, Brenda elaborated on this feeling:

And, um, so nothing changed for him at all. And I'm not gonna lie, like I was resentful of that. It seems like everything stays the same for him. And, you know, I -- I'm always the one that has to give up, you know, my job or whatever it is. That's just how it works. He makes more money than me, and he'd been at this job way longer, so you know, it's me that has to make the sacrifice and I understand it and he understands it, but at the same time, we are a little bit resentful, and it's not fun, but... So his life has stayed the same.

Because her husband made more money than her at his job and had worked there longer, it was Brenda that had to resign from her job. There are numerous reasons why her husband likely worked at this job longer, including the 'mommy penalty', where women are penalized for taking time off work for childcare (see Budig & Hodges 2010) or the historical and persistent moral association between mothers engaging in paid work and selfishness (Damaske 2013). For Brenda, these structural forces are tellingly reduced into a single phrase; "that's just how it works." Barbara, a mother of two elementary aged children, used similar justifications for bearing the brunt of at-home learning and care work:

It's funny, as a mom, you don't get a lot of free time at all. I haven't and I had just... I became a stay-at-home mom when my mom actually couldn't babysit my

kids and we didn't want the kids to go to a daycare. So I started staying home. So it wasn't really planned. And then I did that for six years and my daughter went to kindergarten and then I had three different jobs that I was doing part-time in between where the kids went to school and then the pandemic happened and it all went away and I became the stay at home mom again.

Here, we see that Barbara's experiences align with other mothers in that it was them and *not* their husbands who left the workforce to look after children. Similarly, this is not the first time this has happened, showing that COVID-19 is not an outlier, but part of a pattern of mothers leaving the workforce to care for children. Barbara then explained her justification for staying home:

And so I just kind of feel like my life, just whatever I do just completely hinges on what my kids need. *Which I suppose is how it should be*, but at the same time, as they get older, they get more little attitudes. And so it's not like they're particularly grateful for the sacrifices I make. I don't have a career but they're good kids and we're doing what we think is best for them. (Emphasis added)

Similar to Brenda's justification that women leaving their jobs is "just how it works," Barbara explained that her life and employment status revolving around her children and, thus, her justification for leaving her jobs and devoting her time to care work is "just how it is supposed to be." Barbara further explained that she hoped that her daughters did not follow her example, as being a stay-at-home mom conflicted with her "girl-power" values. Melissa, a pre-school teaching assistant, quit her job to handle at-home learning. Like Barbara and Brenda,

Melissa explained that she was good at and enjoyed her job, justifying her resignation by saying, “Family comes first.” Again, this can be explained by Damaske’s (2013) argument that morality is ascribed to working motherhood, with working mothers feeling as if they must justify paid labor by framing it in their family’s best interest, implying an inherent selfishness associated with mothers and paid labor. As Caitlyn Collins (2019) argues, American women have internalized the idea that mothers are entirely responsible for the wellbeing of their family and, thus, Melissa feels as if the only solution to finding care is leaving a job that she loves. This is validated by Melissa’s explanation that her and her husband did not negotiate her decision to leave, fully accepting the responsibility for taking care of her family:

It makes me sad that, um, that was a decision that had to be made based on the needs of our family. Um, that's not something that my husband, his income is higher than my income, and so I, if one of us had to leave our jobs it was, *it wasn't even a discussion, I would be the one that had to leave the job.* (Emphasis added)

Unlike Brenda, Barbara and Melissa offered explicit explanations for why they and *not* their husbands resigned from their jobs to provide care for their children and facilitate their at-home learning. Because their husbands’ incomes were higher, Barbara and Melissa justified their departure from their employment as opposed to their husbands’ based on earning power. This is in line with Dempsey’s (2000) finding that negotiations over house- and care-work are where interpersonal power in a relationship is wielded. Dempsey argues that men’s cultural and institutional privilege means that they have access to material goods, services from others, higher paying and more status -conferring jobs, connections to those who can provide valuable goods, educational opportunities, and personal autonomy. In comparison, women’s jobs are less well

paying and attract less social status than men (Collins 2019; Dempsey 2000). Because of these structural forces, men often have more power in marriage than their wives. This may explain why Brenda and Barbara, rather than their husbands, resigned from their jobs to care for their children in the face of childcare shortages. It also may explain why, in Melissa's case, there was no point in even *engaging* in a conversation about who would leave their job. In Barbara and Melissa's case, because their husbands contributed more to family income, they held more power in their marriages and thus had the privilege of maintaining their employment.

LOOKING FOR THE POSITIVE: MOTHERS' EMOTION WORK

Of the mothers who disproportionately handled care- and school-work, especially those who resigned from their jobs to do so, many expressed experiencing feelings of resentment, sadness, and guilt. To deal with the negative emotions that accompanied inequalities in care/school-work and employment, mothers employed numerous emotion tactics. Hochschild (1979) defines emotion work as the process of altering an emotion through evocation or suppression. Similarly, Lois (2006) argues that homeschooling mothers, a realm of work comparable to the at-home learning duties held by the respondents in this study, perform emotional labor while teaching their children. Although the mothers differ in that they are not homeschooling as they receive assistance from the public school system and do not craft their own curriculum, the mothers in both studies can be compared in that they are both for the first time acting as the primary learning facilitator for their children *for no pay*. Lois found that homeschooling mothers felt burned out and stressed after performing *triple* days, feeling that they must perform homemaker, mother, and teacher roles to their fullest potential. This role integration, particularly of academic aide and mother, and the accompanying burnout is reflected

by the mothers during COVID-19, especially in the absence of help from their partners. In a subsequent study, Lois (2010) found that mothers, overwhelmed by the demands of homeschooling and stressed by the unwillingness of their husbands to contribute to care- and school-work, performed temporal emotion work. Lois found that mothers shifted their experience of time, savoring moments/nostalgia and relying on fear of later regret of uninvolvement in their children's lives to mitigate problematic emotions. They also justified their problematic emotions by assuring themselves that they were only temporary and would disappear when their child was older.

Similar emotional tactics were employed by the mothers in this study. For example, Janine actively sought opportunities to make her family's newfound time together a positive experience. Like many mothers, she continually emphasized how fortunate she was, despite being the primary academic aide for her children and staying up late into the night to help them with schoolwork. Janine described feeling "spoiled" and explained that she had more than she needed and was grateful for what she had. This form of gratitude-evoking emotion work, which I will refer to as *relative emotion work*, which is distinct from temporal emotion work. Respondents used the unique health crisis created by COVID-19 and their relative health to alter their emotions, arguing that their negative emotions were negligible in the face of others' health struggles. Respondents also evoked gratitude to mitigate negative emotions independently of the health crisis. Like Janine, despite being consumed by work and unable to complete her research, Mary continually expressed how grateful and fortunate she was to be able to handle her children's schooling and allow her husband to continue his work, also emphasizing how fortunate her family was to not be sick:

Well, we've been really lucky. So many are not and still are not. Right? I have some close friends who don't work with me anymore but I keep in touch with who are from India, *and they have, of course, real concerns about their family*, or their families have gotten COVID. And thankfully they had one dose of the vaccine already so they didn't die. (Emphasis added)

Here, Mary even says that others have *real* concerns about their families, diminishing the struggles that she faced during lockdown because she didn't face serious health issues. Janine and Mary both actively evoked gratitude, explaining how fortunate they were to not be sick or to have the opportunity to spend time with family.

Laura also employed relative *and* temporal emotion work, stating:

I kind of, I try to, *even though it's crazy and chaotic*, I try to be like, well, the skill you're learning in this whole experience is you've got to learn to adapt. *We're healthy. We're here. It's not so bad. It'll be okay. This is not going to last forever.*

Laura expressed gratitude at being healthy and alive, displaying relative emotion work. She also altered her negative emotions by assuring herself that the situation catalyzing the negative emotions would soon end. This may be an attempt to shift their temporal experience of time, savoring the time they do have with their children to compensate for the stress that accompanies this increased time (Lois 2010). Importantly, Laura expressed that she evoked gratitude *in spite of* the stress that accompanied at-home learning and care-work. Similarly, almost every mother cited increased family time as a benefit of the pandemic despite the stress that accompanied their newfound responsibilities. Lydia, a mother of two elementary aged

children, reported savoring the increased time she had with her children, asking “When do you get this?” Rather than express resentment for being her children’s primary academic aide, Lydia evoked emotions of nostalgia, choosing to savor the time she did have with her children. Another respondent, Melissa, invoked another word for gratitude while speaking about her COVID related struggles:

So I guess I feel grateful that our family is in a position where I can resign from my job, and we're still able to pay a mortgage and put food on the table. So I recognize my privilege in that and that not everyone has that... Those same... those same privileges. But, it stinks [laughs].

Here, Melissa uses the rhetoric of ‘privilege’, utilizing relative emotion work to mitigate the negative emotions that accompany resigning from her job. All in all, to deal with the negative emotions that accompany disparities in school- and care-work, mothers evoked feelings of gratitude and savored the time that they had with children to justify personal loss and the stress that they felt while taking care of their children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Family Tension and Support

Numerous sociologists have found that disaster-related trauma experienced by a family unit can lead to feelings of increased family unity (Botey & Kulig 2013; Reid & Reczek 2011). However, these researchers have studied family dynamics in the face of catastrophic physical disasters that led to displacement. This increased family unity experienced by the families in this study, conversely, is likely a result of the social isolation of the family unit and reliance of family members on each-other for socialization. Close proximity to family members, however, does not

always lead to increased unity. Reid & Reczek (2011) argue that spousal relationships in times of disaster can either be supportive or straining. An inability to contribute to one's family or indifference towards the family can lead to strained relationships. This was evident in the case of Brenda, who expressed resentment that it was her and not her husband that had to sacrifice her job to care for her children. Similarly, Lydia expressed frustration that she was the only parent to transport children to extracurriculars and facilitate online learning.

An interesting source of intra-family support to note is that of the adult daughter and mother. Megan, a mother of three school-age boys and an adult daughter, relied upon this mother-daughter relationship amid stress:

Whenever you go through something rough with somebody, then there's something to talk about. It really felt like we traversed some really big thing, which I mean I guess it was, so that was good. What I went through March through June of 2020, that was impossible. It was just this impossible, unmanageable thing. Having that extra bit of help made the difference between 'I'm going to quit my job because I can't take it anymore, because I have to constantly be here with my kids, to 'she can help out with school so I can get some hours in.' It made a huge difference."

Reid and Reczek (2011) found that displaced mothers relied heavily on adult daughters to help return a sense of normalcy after Hurricane Katrina. This same dynamic is evident here. Though this is the singular case in our data showcasing this pattern, it is notable that the only reason Megan didn't quit her job was because she received external support, notably gendered labor. This speaks volumes; the burden of care-work needn't be shouldered alone, and there is a

solution to the problematic emotions facing many mothers. However, this solution may exacerbate the gender division of labor if solely women are expected to act as an external support network.

DISCUSSION

Women are exceptionally vulnerable physically, emotionally, and economically during disasters (Enarson et al. 2006; Frankenberg et al. 2008; Hyndman 2008; Weitzman & Behrman 2016). During COVID-19, the mothers in this study suffered economically and emotionally. The emotional reactions in response to paid and unpaid labor disparities are not just important in understanding mothers' experiences during COVID-19, but in understanding mothers' experiences *after* COVID-19. The disparities made visible by COVID-19 are not new, and it's unlikely they'll disappear when stay-at-home directives are lifted and schools resume. Respondents expressed feeling negative emotions in response to at-home learning, care-work, and employment changes. It is important to note the negative emotions experienced by women who left the workforce or reduced their hours to care for and supervise children as mothers are often forced out of paid labor for myriad reasons in non-COVID conditions. Thus, the mental health of women who are forced out of the workplace must be recognized at all times, not just COVID times. Mothers also expressed feeling burned out, especially when juggling paid and unpaid labor. These negative emotions were often mitigated and transformed into more acceptable emotions using emotion work. Interestingly, respondents employed a unique form of relative emotion work, utilizing the unique health crises introduced by the pandemic and their relative health to discredit their own emotions. In response to their emotional challenges, most mothers evoked feelings of gratitude. Jennifer Lois (2006; 2010) argues that this emotional labor

in itself is exhausting. Thus, because mothers have borne the brunt of at-home labor during the pandemic, they've experienced negative emotions in response to inequitable divisions of labor *as well as* strain produced by performing emotion work to mitigate these negative emotions.

Using a disaster sociology framework, it is clear the preexisting inequities in the division of unpaid and paid labor have persisted, if not been exacerbated, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research is part of a greater body of literature that finds that domestic inequalities have grown during the pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; Craig & Churchill 2020; Rinaldo & Whalen 2020). Furthermore, consistent with literature on the topic, the paid division of labor has also been exacerbated, with women more likely than their husbands to reduce hours or resign from their jobs entirely. The justifications by respondents for why they and not their partners left the paid labor force are telling. For example, Melissa explained that she found no reason to even engage in a discussion about who should leave work, knowing without a doubt that she would have to sacrifice her job to “put family first.” These responses suggest that gender and parenting ideologies present prior to the pandemic dictate mothers’ decisions during the pandemic. This aligns with Collins’ (2019) suggestion that social and cultural forces presume women to be primarily responsible for the wellbeing of their family, no matter what they may have to sacrifice. Collins et al. (2020) warn that this disparity may lead to negative schemas of mothers in the eyes of employers, whereas fathers may be rewarded for their commitment. This may have longstanding implications in the future of paid labor, undoing marginal progress for a more equitable division of labor.

Megan’s experience during the pandemic, in which she received help from an adult daughter to more evenly distribute caregiving responsibilities and, thus, experienced emotional

relief and the ability to continue paid labor, illuminates the constructed nature of the gender division of labor. In a time where access to outside care was limited for everyone regardless of social class or comparable barriers, Megan received aide by chance. Her experience illuminates the importance of accessible daycare. Her experience also reveals the benefit of a more equitable division of domestic labor. Women being forced out of the workplace to care for children seems inevitable, but this inevitability has been constructed and is able to be deconstructed. The coincidental ability of Megan to get outside help allowed her to continue her job when other women could not. In a post-pandemic world without stay-at-home directives, access to daycare or the willingness of husbands to share the burden of domestic labor may mitigate the work-family conflict that many have been socialized to believe is solely the mother's responsibility (Collins 2019; Wall 2013). Mothers should not have to choose between their and their family's wellbeing, and Megan's experience clarifies the fallibility of this construct. However, so long as mothers are expected to leave the workplace and bear the brunt of at-home labor, always 'putting family first', the negative impacts of this inequitable labor will persist.

CONCLUSION

Beneath the dominant ideology of intensive motherhood, mothers' emotional and material sacrifice is normalized and valorized (Collins 2019; Damaske 2013; Lois 2006; Wall 2013). This research reveals the negative emotional impact this often taken-for-granted sacrifice has on mothers and the numerous strategies mothers use to discredit and alter their emotions. Per the tenets of disaster sociology, COVID-19 only instigated a scenario that followed a pattern of women sacrificing for the benefit of their family (Bianchi et al. 2009; Collins 2019; Craig & Churchill 2020; Rinaldo & Whalen 2020). As such, women have been rendered exceptionally

emotionally vulnerable during this pandemic. Though women's mental health is perhaps more visible in this time of collective suffering, this sacrifice and the accompanying emotions are nothing new and are bound to persist in the absence of significant cultural and structural changes. As such, the mental health of mothers is not something that need only be worried about now, but is something that always demands attention. Furthermore, scientists argue that pandemics may become more common due to climate change, necessitating a conversation of women's mental health in potential future pandemics (Lustgarten 2020). All in all, in a changing world, and so long as mothers are forced from the workplace and made to bear the brunt of domestic labor, their mental will *always* be of concern and will *always* be a conversation worth having.

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