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The identity struggle facing working mothers

Published 19 January 2024



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Working mothers can struggle to find a balance between their identities as mothers and their identities as professional women. New research by **Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo** explores these tensions and outlines how we can provide better support.

Today in the UK, women are entitled to a year's maternity leave, partners may be eligible for up to two weeks' paid paternity leave and shared parental leave enables eligible couples to split their time off. Yet, after decades of research and legislative changes, working mothers are still struggling to find a balance between their work and care identities.

Most research on motherhood and work has focused on organisational or cultural structures that might inhibit or enable professional women to balance it all when becoming working mothers. However, previous research has generally neglected personal experiences.

New research by Dr Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo, Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE, aims to investigate this underexplored area.

Through in-depth interviews with 80 working mothers over two years from Latin America to North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, Dr Garcia-Lorenzo and colleagues shine a light on the tensions faced every day by working mothers and how they manage them.



If you put your identity as a mother first, then your career suffers, or if you focus too much on your career, then you may have to outsource care for your children. That tension is never fully resolved. ”

Identity tensions

Through the course of the interviews, the researchers found two co-existing narratives at play. The first narrative – the one that is very embedded in society – understands motherhood as a linear process. One where women fall pregnant, take maternity leave, experience a period of uncertainty and identity loss but then aggregate their motherhood and worker identities, return to the workplace and fully integrate.

“This is the narrative that we are told and that we internalise and reproduce,” explains Dr Garcia-Lorenzo. “The organisation you work for, the country where you live or community you’re in may make allowances for you to come back to work but then the assumption is that the process is finished.”

The second narrative – one that is much less recognised in society but which came up constantly in the interviews – is a continuous never-ending process. “While institutionally that transition from worker to mother is considered finished, in your life it’s never finished. Your children are still there, and they are continuously going through transitions and challenges, whether that’s that they are ill or starting high school or suffering from bullying.”

Dr Garcia-Lorenzo continues: “No matter how far we advance and how many policies we have in place supporting mothers, it’s still very clear that it’s the mothers who are still carrying the weight of those transitions and who are constantly having to work on their identity. If you put your identity as a mother first, then your career suffers, or if you focus too much on your career, then you may have to outsource care for your children. That tension is never fully resolved.”

One of the respondents in the study summed up this feeling in her interview – “I spent quite some time feeling I was not doing anything well. I was not giving the best of myself to my baby; I was not giving 100 per cent to my work ... I felt I was a terrible wife, a mediocre mother and not good enough at work.”



More flexibility ... is something that every working mother, across the world, would like to have. ”

Changing the narrative

So, what is the solution? How can we support worker mothers to manage this tension? Dr Garcia-Lorenzo interviewed women across the globe for her research – are these tensions the same everywhere regardless of different maternity laws and practices?

The researchers found tensions existed for all the women interviewed. However, the difficulty felt in managing these tensions varied widely depending on local laws, culture and social expectations. In some countries where little to no maternity support is available, such as in some African countries, it wasn't uncommon for women not to return to work at all. In other countries with generous maternity and childcare support packages, women found it easier to return to work and manage the worker mother tensions.

That said, Dr Garcia-Lorenzo found common patterns across all the women interviewed. "Something we found across the board is that despite all the advances, there is still so much more that can be done and one of the big challenges is integration which requires more flexibility – this is something that every working mother, across the world, would like to have."

Societal expectations and gender stereotypes

Even in many countries with advanced maternity legislation, societal expectations mean that often these laws are not fully utilised. In the UK, for example, even when partners can get two weeks' paternity leave, many don't take this leave as **they worry they will not be seen as serious about their work** if they take it.

Even in cases where both parents work, women anecdotally report that they are often the ones called by the school or nursery when the child is sick. This is something Dr Garcia-Lorenzo believes was really highlighted during the COVID-19 lockdowns where it was **common for women to take on the lion's share of childcare and home schooling**.

The rate of change in this area has been very slow. "Carrying out this study, I was shocked by the slow rate of progress," explains Dr Garcia-Lorenzo. "I have a 20-year-old daughter and the lack of progression in the last 20 years is worrying. I fear if my daughter wants to become a mother in the next 15 years, she will have to go through the same struggles I went through, not only in terms of the accommodations that organisations can make but the expectations that society has of mothers."

Going forwards, Dr Garcia-Lorenzo believes not only do workplaces and legislators need to introduce more flexibility for working mothers, but we also need to change how we think as a society and dispel any narratives that working mothers should be "superwomen" who can do it all. "We need to raise awareness and say it's ok there are tensions, it's ok not to be perfect, it's ok if you can't do and be everything at once – that's impossible." ■

Dr Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo was speaking to Charlotte Kelloway, Media Relations Manager at LSE.

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