

## “INTENSIVE MOTHERHOOD” - INSIGHTS INTO THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

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### *Abstract*

*As intensive motherhood is considered as the most influential contemporaneous maternal model, especially in Western societies, but also in other parts of the world, a succinct exploration of the cultural genealogy of this concept is carried out, with the purpose to shed light on its past and present meanings and effects for women. Navigating through the sets of social values, norms and expectations formed in different stages of the history regarding the role of women, we become more able to assess the current implications of intensive motherhood not only for working women, but also in terms of social and gender relations, focusing our attention both on the strengths and to the possible negative implications of the concept.*

**Keywords:** intensive motherhood, socio-cultural history, gender relations

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### **1. Introduction**

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Intensive motherhood constitutes the dominant contemporary maternal model (Arendell, 2000), especially in Western, well developed societies. Foregone by the so called “mommism” of the 40’s, a type of parenthood that involved a high degree of child protection (Douglas, Michaels, 2005), intensive motherhood developed as a prominent cultural model in the United States since the 80’s. At its core there are an increased attention attributed to children, high standards of formal education and maternal care, and the idea that mothers should directly provide this type of care to their children. In time, intensive motherhood disseminated worldwide, mostly due to the multiplication and development of neoliberal economic regimes (Marinescu, 2022), thus becoming a hegemonic cultural model of motherhood (Collins, 2021), especially of Western societies. Nonetheless, it also exerted influence in other parts of the world, such as Central and Eastern Europe, in countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria and Poland, as illustrated by several studies (Cheresheva, 2019; Pustułka, 2014). In Romania, the sociological academic literature on motherhood is limited and fragmented. Its findings suggest a particular view and history of women work in Romania, that mainly favours the implication of women on the labour market. This pattern is generally attributed to the legacy of the socialist regime and its emphasis on women emancipation through work. Even in this particular context, current

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studies identify patterns of intensive motherhood in the Romanian landscape, such as maternal guiltiness and a conflictive representation and perception of motherhood and work, as distinct spheres of activity, in research such as Teodorescu (2017).

The concept of intensive motherhood has been fiercely criticized, being considered a powerful instrument of social control and women discrimination (Douglas, Michaels, 2005). This criticism is related especially to the use of motherhood as a moral obligation and justification for women remaining outside the labour market, with the purpose to raise their children, and to “locking” women into the labyrinths of moral guiltiness and those of patriarchy.

Despite academic criticism, intensive motherhood has become part of the contemporary vocabulary of motives of the modern parenthood paradigm, together with similar concepts such as intensive or helicopter parenting. Due to its wide dissemination, the concept is mostly perceived as natural, or given, being embraced and supported by societal actors in several child and family welfare policies. In this article, we aim to explore its cultural history, shedding light on its original meanings and symbols, in order to better appreciate some of its contemporary implications for women, children, families and social relations. Therefore we will engage into a succinct cultural genealogy of intensive motherhood through the centuries, navigating into the changing social roles of women and the norms that prescribed these roles and women identity.

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## ***2. Intensive motherhood – meanings and implications***

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The term intensive motherhood was first used by Hays in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), referring to a set of rules, behaviours and attitudes of mothers in relation to their children. Hays explained in her book the triumphal dissemination of the intensive motherhood ideology by considering it part of a larger cultural contradiction between the economic logic and that of non-economic, personal, familial relations. The first paradigm is based on organizational, cost benefit criteria, rationality and impersonality; meanwhile the second one corresponds to the work of care, uninterested love, unpaid work and child sacredness. According to Hays, intensive motherhood is one of the last bastions of the society in the context of an increasingly rationalized and depersonalized world, a bastion that expresses our desire for disinterested love and pure emotional ties, this being the reason for which intensive motherhood has been invested with the highest moral authority and superiority.

Intensive motherhood is massively child focused, therefore involving an intensive emotional, but also, physical labour in child raising, exercised by mothers themselves, under the guidance of professional experts. Such an „intensity” in childcare is morally justified by the idea that children need and deserve mothers’

entire time and attention, the children being conceptualized as important, helpless, sacred and “priceless” (Zelizer, 1985). On one hand, intensive motherhood is possible through self-sacrifice, altruism, generosity and kindness, mainly attributed to women. On the other hand, given its implications for mothers, this model is absorbing and expansive for women. Based on this last aspect, several critiques have been formulated against it. These critiques (for example, Douglas, Michaels, 2005) are centred on the idea that this type of motherhood generates a set of social expectations from mothers to remain at home to raise their children, thus becoming economically inactive. Also, given its intensity and high standards of child rising, it can create feelings of guilt and social exclusion. In this manner, intensive motherhood can become an instrument of social control, sanction and exclusion for the mothers and families that cannot fully embrace its cultural prescriptions, by imposing standards of an idealized motherhood. Understood as a social construct, institution and ideology (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1996) motherhood reflects societal expectations from women, but also representations of ideal families and social relations. Intensive motherhood is based, at its core, on the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideology of the two spheres of activity (Hays, 1966), further discussed in the next section.

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### ***3. The fundament - the ideology of the two spheres of activity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century***

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The ideology of the two spheres of activity emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the Western European space, being specific, initially, to the aristocratic class; gradually it was appropriated by the newly formed bourgeoisie and the working class (Goody, 2000). This set of views was based on a natural association between women and the domestic, private sphere, on one hand, and on the other hand, that of men with the public one. The private sphere was considered the space of children rising, domestic chores, free time, care, sensibility and emotion, meanwhile the public sphere was the space for action, politics, culture, markets, power, competition and rationality. This dichotomy was an element of the social order of the time, with men being the “protectors” of women. Women were deprived of several legal, social and political rights and their participation to the labour market was incipient. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, approximately 30% of women were working in England, Italy and France; the majority of women were servants, in all the European states (Gleadle, 2001). Importantly, only poor women and especially unmarried women were working, those pertaining to the middle class and aristocracy following the prescriptions of the ideology of the two spheres of activity, remaining thus economically inactive.

Several factors have contributed to the emergence and development of the ideology of the two spheres of activity, among which the consolidation of the modern family and social, moral and religious prescriptions of the feminine cultural ideal of the previous century.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the family as a social institution was defined through its association with the idea of a private space, differentiated from the public one, thus following the initial conceptualization of the modern family of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Women’s implication on the “labor market”, in the buoyantly developing factories of the century, even if marginal and modest, has also contributed to the separation between the privacy of the household and economic production, thus strengthening the idea of the modern family as a cohesive, private space (Zelinzer, 1985). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the family was based on warm, personal relations among its members, concentrated around the child, with childhood becoming a privileged age of history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Aries, 1962). This rising importance of the modern family, associated to that of childhood, have made of motherhood an important natural vocation for women and, further in time, their most salient identity (Stacey, 1990; Arendell, 2000). In this context, women were responsabilized with providing high quality maternal care, a social role that has projected a powerful, positive image on women, considered pure and good, in association with motherhood (Rich, 1995; Hays, 1966). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women traditional role became challenged by a series of important factors, such as contraception, the medicalization of reproduction and the powerful influence of feminism (Păunescu, 2012). The most important event in the reconsideration of the social role of women was the mass entrance of white, middle class American women on the labour market, in the 50s. This was the first step for generalized women employment, which was accompanied by a multitude of societal changes. On one hand, this process led to the erosion of the traditional role of women, as prescribed by 19<sup>th</sup> century mentalities, to a re-evaluation of domestic work and the interrogation of traditional gender relations. On the other hand, elements of the past cultural logic, especially of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, persisted in the social imaginary, in the form of intensive motherhood and in the gendered division of housework and childcare. As mentioned, the ideology of the two spheres of activity rested on powerful, 18<sup>th</sup> century societal and moral views on women and families, discussed in the next section.

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#### ***4. The cult of womanhood and chastity of the 18<sup>th</sup> century***

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In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the dominant views on gender roles were traditional and patriarchal, many authors identifying the formation of a so called “cult of womanhood”, centred on the idea of a chaste women (Corbin et al., 2008; Fuchs, Thompson, 2005; LeGates, 1976). According to these conceptions, the most appropriate role of women was the reproductive one, acting in the domesticity of the house and supporting her husband in his public duties. This role was, as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, related to the newly emerging modern family. This supposed a differentiation of the family from the public arena, the family starting to become a place of privacy and intimacy. Simultaneously, dominant social views on children were changing, due to factors such as the emergence of modern educational systems, changes in the family structure and the increase of parental age (Pollock, 1981).

Legates (1976) observed the cultural feminine ideal of chastity in the literature of the time, in literary works such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), or in Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1705), and later in Rousseau's contributions, such as *New Heloise*, *Emile* or *Our education*. Rousseau's literary works, for example, were read especially by the feminine public, promoting the image of an ideal women that was a devoted and modest mother, that directly raised her children and that supported her husband (Fuchs and Thompson, 2005). The views on women were also influenced by the overall 18<sup>th</sup> century emphasis on education, that reflected in the generalized belief that human beings, including women, were "educable". It is in this context in which motherhood became socially and personally important, "maternal love [being] the fundamental psychological value of the new society" (Păunescu, 2012, p. 39). By embracing the cult of womanhood, and given the increasing importance of the family, rich women were not involved in lucrative activities. For the emerging middle class and aristocratic women, marriage was still the main subsistence mechanism. By comparison, working class, poor young and not married women were working, but their work was mainly temporary and had a short duration. In time, the lower social classes, increasingly numerous, have started to adopt, at least as cultural ideals if not as plausible practices, the aristocratic views and social norms on women roles.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century cultural ideals were based at their turn on the cultural logic of the Middle Ages, many authors considering the cult of womanhood a counterbalance to the negative conceptions about women emerged during the Middle Ages (LeGates: 1976; Corbin et al., 2008; Păunescu, 2012); these views are analysed in the next section.

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### ***5. Dichotomist maternity in the Middle Ages***

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In the Middle Ages, the term "maternitas" was proposed, together with that of "paternitas". The idea of chastity and superiority of the religious and spiritual self, as compared to the body, was intensively promoted at that time. According to Corbin et al. (2008), starting with the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the religious reform has imposed several strict rules on marriage and intimate life in Western Europe, as important elements of the social order. Central to these rules there was a negative reconsideration of the body, perceived as inferior and even "the enemy" of the spirit. Moreover, women were thought to have an inclination towards sexuality and disobedience, being seductive (Legates, 2001). According to several authors (LeGates, 1976; Păunescu, 2012), negative images of women were related to Christian beliefs. In that time, several popular and religious views were based on ancient knowledge about women's body, interpreted in an inherently limited manner by the time's theology. In that period, Christianity was promoting celibacy, chastity, asceticism, being centred on religious devotion, both for women and men, which involved "the repudiation of the body" (Păunescu, 2012: 33). In this vision, women were imperfect versions of men, conceived instead as pious wives and mothers. Chastity was

preferred to fecundity and maternity, which was not a central priority for women in the Middle Ages (Păunescu, 2012). In this framework, there was a clear dichotomy between spiritual and carnal maternity, the spiritual one being associated with the image and symbols of Saint Mary, meanwhile carnal maternity being linked to the original sin (Păunescu, 2012); this divergent significances suggested a dichotomist maternity. Moreover, these opinions supported a dual and contradictory view on maternity and the feminine condition, an image that is still accompanying the contemporary social imaginary on motherhood.

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### ***6. Instead of conclusions. Past and present in intensive motherhood***

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As this brief incursion in the cultural genealogy of intensive motherhood has revealed, the Western contemporary, dominant model of motherhood rests on past ideologies on women roles and gender differences. A cultural-historical perspective can facilitate a better understanding of the current meanings and implications of intensive motherhood. One of the main legacies of the ideology of the two spheres of activity, a core concept of intensive motherhood, was the legitimization and dissemination of a familial model in which the father was the only, or the main breadwinner, a familial model that is still actual. Also, the 19<sup>th</sup> century view of the two different spheres of activity gave impetus to a gendered labour division, an element that characterizes, up to a variable extend, current modern labour markets too. As it was mentioned, in the context of globalization, the influence of intensive motherhood has spread also in non-Western regions, including Romania, which might reflect on women's career related decisions and on the configurations of gender regimes. In the case of Romania, much more research is needed regarding motherhood and its relation to work in order to reach more consistent conclusions. Other implication of the intensive motherhood model is that its high standards of raising practices expected from mothers, juxtaposed on high demands of professional success, put pressure on mothers in their daily experiences. Also, these double requirements may be also used to (re)activate non-egalitarian views on the roles of women and men, imposing moral and financial motherhood penalties and generating negative feelings for mothers, such as guiltiness and frustration when trying to reconcile career development and motherhood. Meanwhile intensive motherhood can be praised and supported for the importance attached to children welfare and to self-sacrifice and altruism as important human and social values, especially important in modern times of increasing individualization, its manipulative potential has to be also assessed, as a latent, powerful social force, in which discriminatory gender perspectives might come out.

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