

A Critical Analysis of Working Mother's Work-family Dilemma in Modern European Society: Using the 2021 French Film "À Plein Temps" as a Window

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Abstract: As mothers' labor force participation rate increases dramatically over the past few decades, so is the discussion of their work-family dilemma. It has brought to our attention that the media tend to oversimplify this dilemma and individualize it as an individual problem of women. Using the French film *À Plein Temps* (*Full Time*) as an entry point, this study analyzes the work-family dilemma faced by working mothers in modern European society from the perspectives of structural discrimination and restrictive gender stereotypes, dissects discrimination in the workplace context and the patriarchal gaze behind these phenomena, and concludes with more open-ended and practical initiatives. Combining the empirical and theological analysis, this study is able to explore the root causes of the widespread problem of work-family dilemma. Our findings support the existence of workplace discrimination and pre-determined negative gender stereotypes against working mothers. We argue that mothers' work-family dilemma reflects the structural sexism in today's society.

Keywords: Feminism, Working Mothers, Sexism, Structural Discrimination, Negative Gender Stereotypes

1. Introduction

France has one of the most complete social security systems and one of the longest histories of social welfare in the world. Social security was introduced in 1932, the minimum wage law was put into efficiency in 1950, and "salarie minimum interprofessionnel de croissance" provision increased the lowest salaries faster than the inflation rate [1]. Beginning in 1988, the government paid special subsidies for the meager and no-income community. From the point of view of the education system, education is free for French children between the ages of 6 and 16, and public universities have no tuition fees and only charge a certain registration fee [1].

However, even in such a well-established system, workers still face challenges: a portion of their wages is treated as a mandatory contribution, a special government tax on all forms of income, and decades of low inflation have indirectly led to very limited wage increases [2]. Since the first strike movement in France in the 19th century, strikes have become a form of class struggle in Western

Europe [3]. Until now, there have been three major strikes in France, each with a different aim, causing transportation, education, cleaning, and manufacturing to a halt.

Under this context, the struggle of a working mother is spotlighted. “À Plein Temps” is a multiple award-winning French movie directed by Eric Gravel telling the story of Julie: a single mother of two who lived in the countryside and worked as a hotel maid in a luxury hotel in central Paris. When she finally got the job interview that she had hoped for, a nationwide strike broke out with serious affect on the public transportation system, the essential connection between her workplace and home. In such a hostile environment, Julie ran between her job, interviews, and family in search of more possibilities.

One of the underlying concepts of our research is the film's meticulous portrayal of Julie's work-family dilemma. The work-family dilemma of mothers typically can be defined as the difficulty that women have in distributing their energy for careers, family, and childcare [4]. The past twenty years marked a significant increase in women's participation in the workplace. On top of their increased participation in paid work, mothers still bear significant domestic duties. With limited energy and increasing responsibilities, women often find themselves struggling between two identities: mother and worker.

Along with the rise of work-family conflict are the ideals of super moms [5]. The models of super moms portrayed in the media emphasize personal merit and hard work but acknowledge little about the importance of support in the form of legislation, like subsidized child care or paid family leave. Using the character Julie from “À Plein Temps” as an example, this study will argue the presence of structural discrimination against mothers and restrictive gender stereotypes that cause work-family dilemmas.

2. Structural Discrimination

There is a wild range of empirical support for the disadvantages mothers faced at work, and these disadvantages are caused by structural discrimination instead of mothers' personal choices. In this study, we decompose this agenda into two perspectives: hiring discrimination and the motherhood wage penalty.

2.1. Hiring Discrimination

Working mothers are in a disadvantaged position from the earliest phase of the hiring process. In the movie, Julie, a hotel maintenance, is interviewing for a job in a large retail company, which might be regarded as astonishing. However, the fact was that Julie had a master's degree in finance and a valuable working background. The interviewer asked if she felt devalued by being a market researcher, which Julie immediately denied. This question raised by the interviewer emphasized the striking contrast between Julie's current work and her position a few short years ago. The audience is left to wonder why Julie, with her highly valuable background, ends up performing such ground-level work.

Although the movie never fully explained her previous working experience, Julie exclaimed to the hotel manager that all the applications she had filed had failed and the retail company would be her last hope. Why does Julie struggle to find a job that matches her qualifications? The significant disadvantages faced by working mothers during the hiring process are hinted at here.

2.1.1. Mothers are Less Likely to Get Hired

Multiple field studies and observational studies have proven that mother applicants experience more hiring discrimination compared to non-mothers and men [6-10]. A recent study by González, et al. demonstrates that when profiles are manipulated in that parenthood status is the only variable, women with children received significantly fewer callbacks than childless women (7.9% vs 12.4%) and

childless men (7.9 % vs 13.6%) [10]. This data, in line with results from previous studies, provides strong empirical support for employer discrimination against working mothers [7,11]. It is a direct refutation to the argument that mothers are less desirable to hire simply because of their inferior profiles, an argument that ignores the vast number of studies proving that mothers are hired less even when they have the exact same qualifications as nonmothers. It is a direct refutation to the argument that mothers are less desirable to hire simply because of their inferior profiles, an argument that ignores the vast number of studies proving that mothers are hired less even when they have the exact same qualifications as nonmothers [12].

Therefore, the barrier that working mothers must overcome is way more than choosing between family responsibilities and work, but institutional discrimination against them. In the movie, Julia is rejected by nearly all companies she applied to even when she lowers her standards and is willing to prioritize work over family. With the differences in professional abilities eliminated, the only explanation left for the observed gap in hiring employer's discrimination against mothers.

2.1.2. Mothers' Career Capabilities are Discriminatorily Perceived

Sociologists have proven that mothers are often perceived as less capable of work, which is potentially why they are hired less [13]. In the study conducted by Correll, et al., participants were asked to evaluate two application files, one parent and one non-parent, for the same position [7]. The result demonstrates that mothers are judged as approximately 10% less competitive and 15% less committed than nonmothers. However, the gap is not found in the ratings of fathers and nonfathers [7]. Other research also proves that working mothers are considered less "good employees" compared to nonmothers [14]. Despite their equal achievements, mothers are often judged by a stricter standard by society and considered less successful than their nonmother counterparts.

These studies suggest that society has a predetermined doubt about mothers' commitments to work, which leads people to unconsciously disapprove mothers' achievements in the labor market [7]. It is not surprising, then, to find that mothers experience significant hiring discrimination considering they are often perceived as less suitable for jobs [15].

Apart from doubting mothers' value in the labor market, society also disconnects the concept of motherhood from the capability in the labor market [14,16]. The public's perceptions of mothers are compatible with career success, and if there are such "outliers," then those mothers must be somewhat inferior elsewhere [17]. Assumptions about their abnormality are made unconsciously and held true by society without the need for any supporting observations. For example, when sociologists manipulate a mother applicant's file so that she definitively proves her competence and commitment, discriminations are still observed, but only transferred into a "normative" one. Evaluators view the highly successful mother applicant as less likable and more interpersonally hostile, although admitting their success as an employee [17]. This normative discrimination reflects the cultural beliefs that career success is not linked to the stereotypical qualities of motherhood such as caring and tenderness but is more associated with masculine characteristics like ambition and assertiveness.

2.2. Motherhood Wage Penalty

Discrimination against working mothers occurs beyond the hiring process. It is also present in the workplace in form of wage penalties. In the movie, Julie suffered a significant wage downgrade. When she first entered the workplace, she was ambitious and prospective. However, after taking a pause for parenting, she ended up being a poorly paid hotel maintenance and had to support her family on this single wage. Although at the end of the movie, Julie gets the new job offer, it was more than likely that her salary would be less than four years ago. This series of dramatic income changes reflect the motherhood wage penalty in society.

2.2.1. The Wage Gap between Mothers and Nonmothers

The working mother is a characteristic status that indicates less competence, fewer promotion opportunity, and lower initial salaries. The motherhood wage penalty can be defined as the wage gap between childless women and working mothers [7]. Multiple cross-sectional studies and observational studies indicate that working mothers earn lower wages than nonmother employees. In a cross-sectional study conducted by Anderson, Binder, and Krause, the “pure” children effect is found on the motherhood penalty [18]. For the coefficient of the “pure” children effect, it can stand for the difference in the number of children the mother raises. In a pure children circumstance, the explanatory variable can only be defined as the number of children the mother has, and the response variable is the percent of wage penalties the mother suffers. When participants’ education level and experiences are controlled, college-graduated women having more than one child undergo about a 15 percent wage reduction, and women having one child pay about a 4 percent wage penalty [18]. This study demonstrates the existence of the motherhood wage penalty despite the unobserved heterogeneity between mothers and non-mothers.

Anderson et al.’s study does not stand alone. The cross-sectional study conducted by Gangl and Ziefle demonstrates the relationship between childbirth and motherhood wage penalty in British, the United States, and German [19]. Assuming the difference in work experiences and job characteristics are accounted for, researchers obtained an estimation of the wage penalty for motherhood between about 10% and 18% per child in fixed-effects regression models, with the penalty for German mothers tending to be at the top end and wage penalties for British and American mothers being somewhat smaller and more in the lower end of that range [19].

Moreover, due to discrimination, working mothers would be less competitive than other applicants. This can be beneficial to other applicants like nonmothers and male applicants, which is defined as the Childless bonus phenomenon. According to the audit study conducted by Correll et al., based on the effect of parental status, mothers suffer a reduction of about 6.4% in their commitment ratings compared with the male applicant and about 12.1% compared with childless women [7]. Nevertheless, compared with childless women, mothers were 6 times less likely to be recommended for a job than childless women [7]. On top of that, working mothers tend to earn lower initial salaries than nonmothers. According to Correll et al., the starting salary for mothers (\$ 139,000) is 7.9% lower than for childless women (\$151,000) and 8.6% lower than for fathers [7].

2.2.2. Unexplained Wage Residual for Motherhood [Productivity & Work effort]

In the movie *Full time*, as a single working mother with two kids, the top task for Julie is finding the balance between work and childcare. Julie is a microcosm of millions of working women in the workplace.

Many research studies and field studies have proven that employers have a bad impression of working mothers: less productive, less dependable, and less committed [7,13,14,20]. Conversely, employers would like to classify working women as more emotional, more irrational, and more sensitive. The logic behind this is that mothers dissipate their energy to take care of their children [21]. If the amount of energy is fixed, more effort of working mothers dissipates on their children, and less energy translates to work. Therefore, compared to childless women and male workers, it seems like working mothers will bear lower productivity at work.

According to the traditional division of labor, mothers should devote their time and energy to “family-friendly” occupations [22]. Therefore, they are often encouraged to have a flexible work schedule instead of committing fully to their career. Researchers at Pew Research Center conducted a survey among working mothers over the span of a decade, asking them “what the ideal situation for you would be—working full-time, part-time, or not at all outside the home?”. In 1997, 32% said full-

time work is the ideal situation for them, and 48% said part-time work is ideal, and in 2007, only 21% of them still chose a full-time job. Conversely, the percentage of part-time jobs increases from 48% to 60% [23]. The data above indicates that as women grow more into their characters as mothers, their attentions seem to be converted from their careers inevitably, which might account for some of the wage penalties they suffer. Gender stereotypes and ideals of motherhood that force mothers away from their careers will be further discussed in the next section.

3. Negative Gender Stereotypes

Working mothers often face criticism both at work and at home [5]. In the film, Julie's boss accuses her of neglecting the hotel work, her colleagues regard her as dragging everyone down, and the neighbor who takes care of her children also complains that she is too hard-hearted. These clips in the movie convey a strong sense of frustration. A closer look at the criticism and difficulties that working mothers face in developed European societies will lead us to the negative gender stereotypes that are pre-determined by companies or the labor market.

The topic of negative gender stereotypes will be divided into three parts in the following section. The first is shaped perceptions, the second refers to assumptions with the filter, and the third part is the ultimate orientation [24-29].

3.1. Shaped Perceptions

First, there is an abuse of parenting essentialism. One of the mainstream reasons for negative gender stereotyping is the perverse relationship people have established between motherhood and the essentialization of childcare [24]. Within this context, children's "need" and children's "want" are conflated by adults, and parenting is no longer a mutual relationship between family and child but is reconstructed as a child-centered, child-oriented power structure. Clearly, the child becomes a power puppet of the patriarchal family [24].

Second, a careless attitude is easily put towards childcare work. The emotional character of parenting has been overplayed. It has been glorified as a relaxed and enjoyable state of perfection that seems to require only the presence of the child and mother with each other. However, Parenting has its unique framework and mechanism. It is a labor-intensive, time-consuming, and emotionally absorbing work [30].

Systemically, negative gender stereotypes construct a binary model of devotion, the work-devotion schema, and the family-devotion schema, which correspond to society's expectations of the ideal worker and the sacred mother, respectively [30-32]. Under normal circumstances, they can support each other on different levels, meeting the mother's self-acceptance as well as the expectations of society. However, society always requires mothers to maximize both criteria without significant improvements in other factors such as time, environment, and policy support [30]. This forces mothers to switch commitments, which in effect is a way to protect their sense of self-worth and dignity. But in the context of negative gender stereotyping, this is understood as a compromise [24].

3.2. Assumptions with the Filter

Based on this perception, an unwarranted gaze at mothers in the workplace also emerges. Based on the binary system of devotion, there is also a binary cultural understanding of the traditional mother and the ideal worker, which assumes both the complete fixation of women in a single scenario and the efficiency of childcare or work are not affected by any societal factor [25]. As soon as there is a possibility of the intersection of two understandings in the same subject, external environments react negatively toward that woman. In the workplace, this is reflected in the more or less derogatory

attitude of employers toward employees who are mothers when evaluating promotions and measuring salaries [26].

These assumptions typically follow the female employee from her visible pregnancy to childbirth and to caring for the baby. When visible pregnancy is observed, more often than not this is seen as a signal that corresponds to female employees starting to be less productive, starting to contribute less to their work, less trustworthy, and less authoritative [26-27]. When a woman gives birth, this is more likely to be seen as the beginning of a woman's physical weakness and vulnerability to moodiness. As children grow into toddlers, once female employees take time off or request other job changes, although in full compliance with company rules and regulations, they are also seen as ordinary mothers who have no time for work [25].

3.3. The Ultimate Orientation

Ultimately, working mothers are classified into different levels according to these settings [27-29]. An excellent working mother is considered to have all the freedom and all the possibilities [28]. They are portrayed as enough empowered and enterprising. Regardless of the availability of outside help or support, excellent working mothers are in charge of managing family alongside work. The cunning presupposing of this evaluation system is that once the individual doesn't meet the requirements of a perfect working mother, there is no difference between excellent, good, and normal levels since they are all "soon-to-be-bad workers and mothers" [30].

In the context of negative gender stereotypes, any potential problems will be converted into self-accountability, self-acceptance, self-adjustment, and emotional self-care for working mothers [24]. Using the private sphere of the family allows the problem to be individualized and naturalized, thus weakening the deep-rooted conflicts [33]. Negative gender stereotypes exaggerate subjectivity and individualism, overemphasizing the importance of the individual's free choice while ignoring that this is actually the manifestation of social constructions [24,28]. Simply emphasizing choice without discussing expensive inflexible childcare institutions, the wide gap between rich and poor, and other conditions that constrain and shape mothers' choices.

4. Conclusion

From a practical perspective, this research supports that structural discrimination against working mothers exists. Multiple studies demonstrate that European mothers are less likely to get callbacks from employers even when they are equally qualified as nonmothers. On top of the disadvantaged in the hiring process, there is also a vast amount of empirical research that shows that motherhood status brings significant wage penalties to working mothers. From a theoretical perspective, this research concludes that abused parenting essentialism, binary schemas of devotion, and standards of perfect working mothers' evaluation all impose multiple constraints on European working mothers as a whole that are difficult to eradicate. Therefore, using the movie "À Plein Temps" as a window, this paper is able to prove that the work-family dilemma of working mothers is not an individual issue, but an institutional one with discriminatory workplace treatments and stereotypical gender beliefs as its structural contexts. Thus, to struggle against the work-family dilemma, mothers need to seek structural changes instead of only relying on personal merit.

Although this study focused on the social context of European countries, the results can be applied to a broader context since the bondage of working mothers is widespread in many societies and political systems.

There are four additional social implications that can be derived from this study. Firstly, there should be paid family leave policies that encourage paternity leave, which provides both parents time and energy to take care of the children instead of putting this responsibility solely on the mothers.

Secondly, childcare accessibility and affordability need to be enhanced to create a better opportunity for both parents to work full-time in a family. Thirdly, stricter policies against workplace gender discrimination should be implemented. Fourth and foremost, negative assumptions and stereotypes of working mothers need to be eliminated, which requires further efforts by activists.

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