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## How to support mothers on Mother's Day and every day of the year

*Mothers are pressured to comply with clashing motherhood ideals and workplace demands. On the occasion of Mothers' Day (30 March this year in the UK), **Anne Theunissen** shares key research insights and best practice to better support mothers every day of the year.*

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Mother's Day, which is celebrated this year on 30 March in the UK, recognises and honours mothers and motherly bonds. This celebration reflects broader societal values in which motherhood (and parenthood more broadly) is seen as the norm, and in which notions of **hegemonic femininity** are linked to women's reproductive capacities.

Women are not only assumed to (want to) be(come) mothers, but they are also expected to comply with dominant notions of what good motherhood entails. Moreover, as many mothers are active on the labour market, these working mothers are confronted with (often clashing and incompatible) demands around worker and motherhood ideals. In recognition of these motherly struggles, the following research-based insights show how mothers can be better supported on Mother's Day and on any other day of the year.

## The pressures of motherhood ideals

Social scientists **have shown** how in WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic) societies like the UK, neoliberal and patriarchal pressures have shaped notions of motherhood as an individual, gendered responsibility. Despite women's increased participation in the workforce over the past decades, in the age of **intensive mothering**, mothers rather than fathers are assumed to raise children and are held accountable for every aspect of their child's wellbeing. According to the **motherhood literature**, dominant motherhood norms demand mothers to be attentive to their child, to secure their child's successful development, to fulfil workplace

commitments while giving their child their undivided attention, to stay in control of their body as well as their child, and to be happy mothers (despite all this self-sacrifice).

For decades, feminists such as **Élisabeth Badinter** have criticised these (nearly) impossible to achieve motherhood ideals, among others for making women slaves to their children and for **perpetuating gender inequality** at home and beyond. Recent phenomena like the “**wine mom**”, in which typically white middle-class mothers turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with combined work and parenting stress, are symptomatic of the challenges that mothers face. Yet, the additional struggles of moms who are confronted with intersectional forms of inequality, such as low(er) class mothers, racialised mothers, queer mothers and single mothers, may be even more severe. They might, for example, **face stigmatisation** and be discouraged from further reproducing themselves.

## The pressures of worker ideals

Besides having to comply with motherhood ideals, working mothers are pressured to live up to ideal worker expectations. Joan Acker and other social scientists have shown how **implicit notions** of ideal workers as unencumbered employees who don't have any (child)care responsibilities and can fully devote themselves to their job disadvantage mothers in their career. Workplaces have traditionally been designed based on the traditional male breadwinner model in which there is no room for breastfeeding and sick toddlers who need to be picked up from daycare during office hours. Whereas stay-at-home mothers have become outdated, workers continue to be judged based on ideal worker standards. These expectations of employees' full workplace availability feed into **perceptions of mothers** as less ideal and less ambitious employees, which hampers their upward career mobility.

Developments such as **increased acceptance** of hybrid and flexible modes of working and the rise of (more) **involved fatherhood** have supported working mothers in balancing their parenting and workplace responsibilities. However, especially in male-dominated workplaces in which women are (heavily) underrepresented (at the top), mothers are confronted with motherhood biases.

For example, in a study on women in Capital Markets by researchers of **LSE's Inclusion Initiative**, mothers who were interviewed shared that they were excluded from business trips and after-office hours networking events based on the assumption that they would not be available, sometimes despite having fully outsourced their childcare responsibilities to nannies and partners. Others talked about colleagues only chatting about kids rather than sharing key business insights after they returned from maternity leave, and about their managers' reluctance to promote them since they became mothers. One woman told us that her colleagues considered motherhood a form of career suicide.

# Support at home and at work

To better support mothers in society and the workplace, it is key to recognise that the pressures with which they are confronted are social norms that can be changed. Promoting inclusive notions of motherhood in which all mothers are equally celebrated, irrespective of aspects such as their class background, sexuality, racialised identity and relationship status, can broaden ideas of who constitutes a good mother.

Additionally, praising imperfect (as opposed to intensive or neglectful) motherhood practices that balance the wellbeing and needs of both mother and child creates room for more healthy and realistic motherhood ideals. Rather than solely holding mothers responsible for childrearing, encouraging the equal involvement of especially the other (co-)parent(s) (if present), but also contributions of other actors such as wider family members and childcare professionals, gives mothers some space to breathe.

In the workplace, it is crucial to acknowledge that parenthood is not a women's topic, and that a healthy work/life balance is not only for parents. Although struggles to combine work and childcare responsibilities are often at the centre of organisational women's support initiatives, such practices might implicitly and unintendedly perpetuate gender stereotypes that reinforce harmful motherhood ideals.

Efforts that focus on motivating fathers to take up parental leave and to commit to their fair share of child- and household responsibilities may help to disrupt such gendered stereotypes. Moreover, respecting the work/life balance needs of all workers, rather than only of parents, helps to undermine ideal worker notions that implicitly divide the workforce into more and less desirable workers based on their (presumed) availability. Through such inclusive practices, mothers can be supported not only on Mother's Day but on any other day of the year.

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## About the author

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