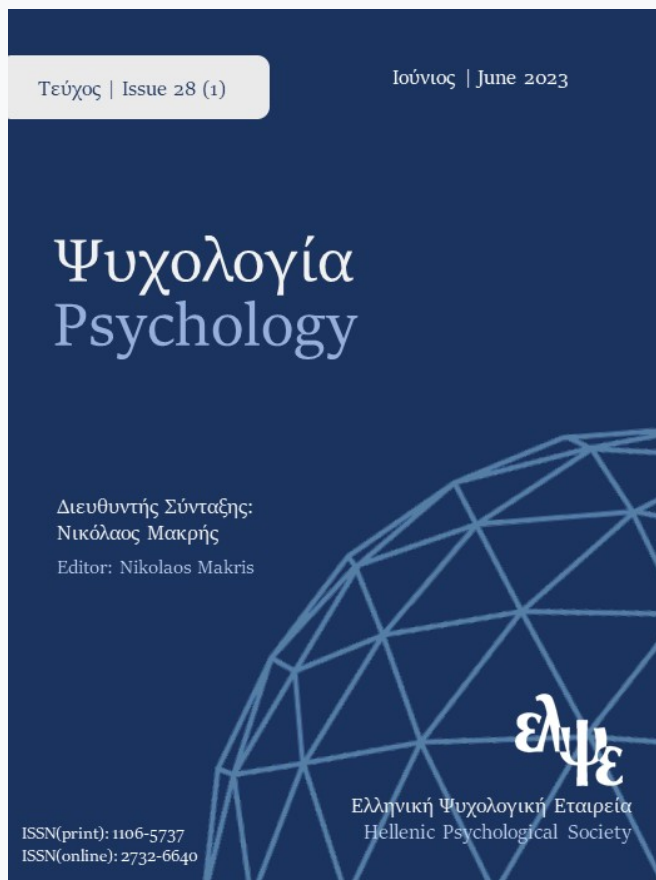


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# Working mothers in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic: the conceptualization of “good motherhood” in conditions of lock-down and teleworking

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## KEYWORDS

“good motherhood”,  
Working mothers,  
Multiple roles,  
Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Greece in March 2020 caused many changes in daily life. Mothers' duties increased dramatically during the pandemic, as external childcare support was practically non-existent. Working mothers had to manage their different roles and identities at the same time, with teleworking becoming mandatory. This article aims to understand how contemporary working mothers in Greece conceptualize “good motherhood”, taking into consideration the particularities of the pandemic. Eight working mothers with children between the ages of 3 and 18 from various parts of Greece responded to a public invitation posted on a popular social media platform. They participated in a semi-structured online interview during which they were invited to talk about their experience of the lock-down in relation to their role as working mothers. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). A common theme that emerged from their stories was the experience of loss of control over their lives and possibly a loss of the multiple dimensions of their identity, which appeared to have been reduced to being just a mom. Gender and parenting ideologies present prior to the pandemic continue to affect working mothers' experiences during the pandemic.

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## Introduction

Since March 2020 when WHO declared the COVID-19 pandemic, this highly contagious virus has had a tremendous impact on global health and well-being (Kira 2021), as it has brought dramatic changes into daily life and negatively affected family routines and functioning (Brown et al., 2020; Panagiotopoulou & Papadopoulou, 2021; Prime et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020; Zhou, 2020). Women, especially working mothers, suffered the hardest blow. An article from Rutgers Today (Intrabartola, 2022) stated that “In 2020, women with school-age children definitely experienced a 'COVID motherhood penalty'” (par. 3). A recent review (Ervin et al., 2022) indicated that during the pandemic women continued to carry the burden of unpaid work, which resulted in their greatest exposure to mental health problems compared to men. There have been various studies between 2020 and 2021 pointing to a decrease in women's productivity due to serious mental health issues and the multiple roles they were called to play (Clark et al., 2021; Freundel, 2021; Johnston et al., 2021; Khodabakhshi-Koolae & Aghaei Malekabadi, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Ségeral, 2020; Wandschneider et al., 2022). There is growing evidence that mothers report increased levels of guilt, anxiety, and stress compared to fathers (Brown et al., 2020; Malkawi et al., 2020).

COVID-19 penalization of motherhood created an impossible situation for working mothers who, as the primary caretakers, found themselves performing all their social roles simultaneously and exclusively in the private domain of their home (Alon et al., 2020; O' Sullivan et al., 2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way working mothers navigate the tensions between their mother and worker identity has been attracting researchers' interest worldwide. So far, results indicate that working mothers experienced negative emotions at

the beginning of the pandemic, which placed them in significant psychological distress (Clark et al., 2021). A major factor that caused this increased stress was the burden of remote schooling and the lack of support (O'Sullivan et al., 2022). Even the more "privileged" academic mothers faced the challenges and pressures that were present in the pre-pandemic period even more amplified (Bowyer et al., 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020).

The intensification of the burdens that working mothers had to bear during the pandemic (Friedman et al., 2021; Rohl, 2021) and mothers' guilty feelings due to their difficulty in achieving the "good mother" ideal are linked to the dominant discourse of intensive motherhood (Cummins & Brannon, 2022). "Intensive motherhood", a term coined in 1996 by sociologist Sharon Hays, is "characterized as one that is child-centred, time and labor intensive, fully emotionally absorbing, and frequently expert-guided" and "paints a picture of the contemporary mother as self-sacrificing and fully devoted to the needs of her children, usually at the expense of herself" (Miller, 2022, p.32). This ideology prescribes what constitutes a "good" mother (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010) and interacts with the "ideal worker" ideology (Brumley, 2014 as cited in Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2022; Batram-Zantvoort et al., 2021). The "ideal worker" is someone completely committed to work; this means that work always takes precedence over family. Working mothers are caught between these two contradicting ideals as they try to form a "working mother" identity (Güney-Frahm, 2020; Lott & Klenner, 2018).

Before the pandemic, research (Christopher, 2012; Dillaway et al., 2015; Dillaway & Paré, 2008; Paré, 2016) showed that working mothers tried to address this good mother/good worker polarity by employing alternative ways, such as delegating care tasks to third parties and by focusing more on themselves, which was described as "extensive mothering" by Christopher (2012). During the pandemic, working mothers continued to challenge the dominant discourse of "intensive motherhood" (Cummins & Brannon, 2022) by redefining family roles and focusing on their personal needs (Clark et al., 2021). In some cases, however, when working mothers placed their needs before the needs of their children, they rushed to justify this as essential in order to provide and care for their children (Friedman et al., 2021). Once more, despite gender equity gains for women (Miller, 2022), women are placed in front of the "faulty" but "culturally-defined" choice between work and family (Dillaway & Paré, 2021), while what they ask is for organizations and society, in general, to allow them to integrate their two identities into an authentic self (Rohl, 2021). COVID-19 did not prove to be a "great equalizer" (Maestripieri, 2021, p.1), as it intensified and brought forward the gender divide and the prevalent myth of "good mothering". It could be argued that the pandemic has (re-)enforced the "intensive motherhood" ideology on working mothers' perceptions of themselves by being a "reminder" of the existing gender gap (Gross, 2020; Power, 2020).

All studies on the impact of the pandemic on working mothers' handling of the tensions between the "good mother" and "ideal worker" ideals were carried out in North and West Europe, USA, and Australia, where contemporary motherhood ideologies have been developed. These were mostly qualitative studies that allowed working women themselves to speak about their struggles and experiences during the pandemic. It is equally important to listen to the accounts of working women from the European South, especially from Greece where a high value is placed on motherhood despite the low birth rate and the high number of abortions (Davaki, 2013 cited in Tsouroufli, 2020). In Greece, there has not been any study of this kind to the best of our knowledge. A study of working mothers in Cyprus (Hadjicharalambous et al., 2021), a country with a similar culture as Greece, showed that working mothers' resilience, mental health, and quality of life were significantly affected by this pandemic.

The difficulties that working mothers in Greece have been facing, along with the cultural expectations of women to carry the bulk of home and child care regardless of their employment status as well as the scarcity of related studies, prompted this research. In contemporary Greece, gender inequality is very much present. Women's primary role is still considered by many to be that of a mother and a homemaker (Moussourou, 2003; Social Issues Research Center, 2012). Several years before the pandemic, a study showed that the majority of Greek mothers reported guilt about work-life balance (Social Issues Research Center, 2012). It is, therefore, important to see how working mothers in Greece navigated and conceptualized the intersection between worker and mother roles during the pandemic in the context of the dominant gendered constructions of the ideal worker and the ideal mother. This is the aim of the current study. An intersectional approach is deemed necessary, as according to Maestripieri (2021), "the current debate on the effects of Covid-19 has not sufficiently considered how the intersections between existing structures of inequalities affect the impact of Covid-19 on societies" (p.1).

In light of the aforementioned, two research questions are formulated: (1) How did working mothers in Greece experience their dual roles as mothers and workers during the COVID-19 pandemic? and (2) How did

these working mothers make meaning of their experiences regarding competing ideologies on their intersecting roles and identities?

### ***Methodology***

The study followed the guidelines of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to investigate how working mothers in Greece give meaning to their experience of the pandemic and to its impact on their roles as mothers and workers (Smith & Osborn, 2003). It is phenomenological in terms of how participants see the world and interpretive in terms of how the researcher locates meanings and interprets them through her own lenses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It is also idiographic, as it engages in an in-depth analysis of each participant's experience to document common meanings and different nuances in working mothers' accounts (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

### ***Participants***

In accordance with the guidelines of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the method of purposeful sampling was used. Participants had to meet the following criteria: a) be mothers of children 3-18 years old and b) work remotely during the quarantine period. Eight working mothers of children aged 3 to 18 from all over Greece participated in the study. The number of participants was not predetermined; Turpin et al. (1997 cited in Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) recommend six to eight participants for an IPA study as this sample allows the identification of similarities and differences between participants without making data collection too overwhelming for the researcher. Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 45. All were of Greek nationality, university-educated, and lived with their husband and children, with the exception of one who was divorced. Most of the participants – five out of eight - lived in urban areas and the rest in a semi-urban area. The interviews were videotaped with participants' consent and lasted between 31 and 71 minutes. The demographic data of the participants are presented in Table 1. Participants' names were altered to preserve their anonymity.

### ***Interview schedule***

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. An interview schedule was developed to study how Greek women experienced work and motherhood during the lock-downs imposed as a preventative measure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the interview schedule contained open-ended questions that inquired about: (a) personal information, (b) the experience of lock-downs and social distancing measures, and (c) the impact on motherhood. The interview questions were used flexibly by the researchers following the flow of the participants' narratives so that they could encourage working mothers to speak openly about their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

### ***Procedure***

Interviews were conducted via a well-known communications platform that allows video conferencing. This method was used because the restrictive measures to avoid transmission of the virus were still in effect during the time of the interviews, and face-to-face meetings were not possible. Participants were invited through a public invitation posted on a popular social media platform and through the researchers' social networks. The second author, who conducted all interviews, contacted those interested in the study to offer them more detailed information regarding the procedure and set a specific date for the video conferencing interview should their interest in the study remained. The interviews were conducted between March and April 2021, a time during which restrictive measures against the COVID-19 were still in effect in Greece.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis followed the steps suggested by the literature on how to conduct IPA research (Smith & Osborn 2003; Willig, 2015). The interviews were transcribed by the second author (main researcher), who then read the transcribed material in order to become familiar with the data. After the initial, exploratory contact with the text, the researcher proceeded to a systematic and repeated reading of the transcripts, performing at the same time a line-by-line coding of the data from each interview separately, which resulted in the emergent themes. These emergent themes were then carefully re-examined and organized into thematic units. By comparing the thematic

units that emerged from each interview, the researcher developed a list of shared themes. Finally, the common themes were classified under super-themes.

**Table 1**

*Participants' demographic data*

Name	Age	Family status	Area of residence	Children	Age of children	Occupation
Aphrodite	37	married	semi-urban	1 girl 1 boy	5 2	self-employed
Ifigenia	45	married	semi-urban	1 boy	14	private-sector employee
Melina	42	married	urban	2 girls	4 & 2	private-sector employee
Dido	34	married	semi-urban	1 girl 1 boy	8 5	self-employed
Electra	38	married	urban	1 boy 1 girl	10 4	private-sector employee
Athena	40	married	urban	1 boy 1 girl	10 10	private-sector employee
Sophia	33	divorced	urban	1 boy	10	private-sector employee
Cleo	45	married	urban	1 boy	11	civil servant

### ***Ethical and quality issues***

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University, where the second author was a post-graduate student, as this research was part of the second author's master's thesis. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the interview process before the interview, and their informed consent was attained. Pseudonyms were employed, and all information that could reveal their identity was withheld. Before inviting working mothers to participate in the study, two pilot interviews were conducted online, which led to modifications regarding the order and wording of the questions.

To reinforce the reliability and validity of the research, triangulation through multiple researchers was applied. Specifically, five of the eight interviews were given to a colleague who was familiar with qualitative data analysis, taking special care to preserve the anonymity of the participants. A comparison of the themes produced by the two researchers showed no discrepancies. To further ensure the reliability and validity of the results, a systematic review of data was employed; the researcher reviewed the data multiple times and referred not only to the transcribed material but also to the actual interviews throughout the process of data analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Another strategy was reflexivity; the researcher kept a "research diary" in which she recorded thoughts, feelings, and interpretations along with the difficulties she faced throughout the whole study so that the impact of her values, actions, expectations, and choices on the analysis and interpretation of the data can be shown (Issari & Pourkos, 2015). Specifically, during the online interviews, there were several distractions due to connection failures, which affected the way the second author (and interviewer) collected the data as she had to repeat the questions; she also experienced difficulty in observing various nonverbal cues. The interviewer, being a trained psychologist, used her counseling skills, active listening, and taking a non-judgmental stance to encourage mothers to openly share their experiences and feelings. However, she sometimes felt that instead of a

research interview, she was conducting a counseling session, which interfered with data interpretation. The second author, being an academic mother herself, saw herself and her pandemic experiences reflected in the interviews. Both authors discussed these issues and consulted with colleagues to minimize the influence of their personal views and experiences on the results.

## Results

A thorough analysis of the interviews yielded two super-ordinate themes (or super themes) with their respective sub-themes (Table 2), which correspond to the experiences of the participants.

**Table 2**

*Super themes and sub-themes*

<b>Super theme 1:</b> Teleworking= New working reality but same demands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Need to adapt family to work</li> <li>2. Multi-tasking: an impossible (?) undertaking</li> <li>3. In-office work: essential for well-being</li> </ol>
<b>Super theme 2:</b> Motherhood: challenges & redefinition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase in demands and responsibilities</li> <li>2. Feeling trapped</li> <li>3. Need for personal time and return to "normalcy"</li> </ol>

### **Super theme 1: Teleworking= New working reality but same demands**

The first super theme refers to participants' experience of the changes in their jobs – from in-office work to teleworking – due to restrictions imposed to protect the public from COVID-19 infections. It includes three sub-themes: the need to adapt family to work, multitasking, and the need to return to in-office work to maintain one's well-being.

#### ***1. Need to adapt family to work***

The first issue that emerged regarding the new working condition in which the participants found themselves – that of teleworking – was the restructuring of their daily lives to fit the demands of teleworking. This appeared quite a challenge for the working mothers, as they were the ones who had to make the necessary adjustments to meet both the demands of their job and of their family.

Electra talks about the inflexibility of her working environment in terms of demands and working hours. The transfer of all activities to one place, the home, has blurred the boundaries between her different roles. Moreover, she feels that she is responsible for making the necessary adjustments to her family life to meet the demands of work.

*“Work demands are exactly the same, they haven’t changed, I think there is minimal understanding... There is a general sense that because you are at home and cannot go anywhere, there is this wrong sense that you are available 24 hours a day...” (Electra)*

On a similar note, Dido's account reflects the hardship that working mothers experience trying to work at home while at the same time taking care of their children who are also at home due to school closures. She resorts to television - the "easy solution" – to "babysit" them, implying in a way that this is not something that "good" mothers do. She justifies her choice by stressing the demands of her job. Nevertheless, she continues to feel very anxious about meeting her work demands and vents her frustration to her family.

*“...otherwise, I try, I try to work, as much as possible because now that the schools are closed, this makes it difficult for me, it's not easy. ... that is, if I want to sit down and do two or three hours of work, they [the children] somehow had to be occupied and for better or worse, the easy [solution] is for them to sit in front of the TV and watch a children's program, so that I can work in peace...” (Dido)*

Even when working hours are flexible, some working mothers still feel psychologically pressured to meet the demands of their job. Melina reports *“I feel like I have an unfinished business so I am stressed about this thing”*.

Of course, there are also those mothers who view teleworking more favorably and share their relief because with teleworking, they can adjust their time as they wish. Cleo considers herself quite "privileged" because she can do her job from home and has the necessary knowledge and equipment that other working mothers lacked and had to suffer going to work. It is worth noting the use of "suffering" to describe going to work in these extreme circumstances.

## **2. Multitasking: an impossible (?) undertaking**

The blurring of the boundaries between their different roles led to another major challenge for working mothers, multitasking. Participants talk about the dire straits of having to perform many different duties while at home almost simultaneously. These duties include teleworking, doing housework, supervising their children during remote education, and helping them with their homework. Aphrodite and Melina provide a bleak glimpse of their everyday reality.

*"...and at the same time [I have] to entertain E., at the same time to have X... because imagine that I am not only a mother. I have to be a psychologist, I have to be a teacher in the afternoon because I have to help her with her school." (Aphrodite)*

*"...I consider my role to be .... to comfort her, what her teacher would have done in the classroom, ... to have markers, have, to have the scissors, have the glue, to hold whatever the teacher asks that she would do in the classroom until it dries up. At the same time, [I have] to have the baby asleep, fed, [or] awake and quiet throughout this time." (Melina)*

Athena also mentions the fact that only women have to perform multiple duties and this creates psychological tension, which in turn exacerbates the challenges they have to face.

*"...I was preparing food in the kitchen ...and at the same time I had to help my two children with their homework ... and at some point, I lost my temper... it wasn't possible to do all these at the same time.." (Athena)*

Two of the participants felt omnipotent at the beginning of the pandemic, a feeling that appears to have worn off as time passes. Sophia describes herself as a super-hero who can perform multiple tasks simultaneously. Electra shares a similar story and speaks of the realization after a while that multitasking cannot be done for an extended period of time while confined at home.

*"...when I started working [remotely], I felt like a super-hero, that I can combine everything. I cooked and at the same time worked, put the client on mute and was able to answer to K [her son], if he asked me a question and everything was OK." (Sophia)*

*"At the beginning, I was trying to do more and extra for them, what they would normally do at school and at the same time do my job, ... we thought that everything would be done at the same time, then in the real world we saw that everything is not done at the same time." (Electra)*

## **2. In-office work: essential for well-being**

Participants differed in their work arrangements, as some of them worked only remotely, while others were on rotation (some days at home and some days in office) or had to go to work because of the nature of their job. All of them, however, expressed their preference for in-office work as this helped them to maintain a good mental state. Even before the pandemic, time away from home while at work was viewed as personal time and as a way out of the daily routine at home. Working from home for long periods of time was considered an additional aggravating factor for their well-being.

Athena feels relieved when she goes to work because she returns home in a better mood. Before the pandemic she felt pressured by her work, but now work feels more like an outing. Sophia, a single mother, considers going to work to be very important for both her and her son because they can go home fulfilled as they have socialized with other people and do not feel alone.

*"On the days when I get out of the house and go to the clinic and get in touch with people, I confess that my mood is much better, it doesn't bother me if I stay longer at work ... I have seen it as a way out. I will, I will get dressed, I will put on make-up, my mood will change... Now I see it as a walk, these two days of the week are a relief. So, I feel like it's personal time. It's my outing." (Athena)*

*"...you see people at work ... you interact with your colleagues ... and you enter with a different energy into making use of your time with your child when you know that you have done these things in the outside*

*world, he has done these things in the outside world and you enter the house completely different and in a different mood for interaction because you are filled both of you ... of your lives, it's very important.”*  
(Sophia)

Because working from home with the children being there at the same time is extremely difficult, some mothers chose to go to work if offered the option, even risking getting exposed to the virus. They chose to go to work in order to escape from the daily routine and return home in a better mood. This is the case of Electra who also points to the need to separate her roles of mother and worker. It is worth noting the use of the word "home-bound" which shows how difficult it is for her to stay at home for a long period.

*“...I am home bound... I would give it [rotation] a try for two reasons. The first is that when I'll go to work, even beyond my working hours, I'll leave, it's over, you cannot find me afterwards... and the other is to separate mom from work, the working mom from the mom who is just a mom”.* (Electra)

## **Super theme 2: Motherhood=challenges and redefinition**

In the second super theme participants discussed the challenges that the pandemic and the imposed restrictions inflicted upon their role as mothers and attempted to redefine motherhood in this new context. This super theme includes three sub-themes: increase in demands and responsibilities, feeling trapped, and the need for personal time and return to "normalcy".

### **1. Increase in demands and responsibilities**

One of the issues that stood out had to do with the increase in the demands of motherhood. According to the participants, being a mother was tough enough even before the pandemic; however, under these new circumstances (social distancing, social isolation, staying healthy) mothers not only have to remain calm but keep their family calm as well.

In the beginning, home confinement and teleworking were seen as an opportunity to spend more time with their children as mothers, an opportunity they did not have before the pandemic due to the long working hours. Electra and Sophia appreciate the moments they were finally able to spend with their children, being mostly mothers and doing the things that mothers do.

*“... because I used to leave in the morning and returned at about 7 there are some phases of everyday life with the children that I had never seen... in these circumstances, let's say, I saw them waking up, I saw them eating breakfast... I helped my son with his homework at a normal hour and not at eight o'clock in the evening when he was dozing off...”.* (Electra)

*“At the beginning, what I also experienced as an opportunity, that I save two hours coming to and going from [work], that... I will take advantage of my breaks to do some things with K. [son], such as preparing his breakfast... or eating lunch together..., which also didn't happen before because I was coming back from work at six o'clock.”* (Sophia)

However, as time passed by and home confinement became somewhat of a permanent condition without end in the foreseeable future, working mothers began to feel overwhelmed by trying to balance work and family at the same time and in the same space. Aphrodite speaks of the many responsibilities that a mother has and compares motherhood to an online computer game that mothers had to play, overcoming obstacles and moving up levels even before the pandemic. This game became more difficult amid the pandemic, and “mothers had to prove” that they could succeed in it, as she phrases it, implying the multiple demands society places on mothers. She points out that people around expect working mothers to be able to handle their multiple roles during these extreme circumstances with ease without realizing that women are having a hard time and need help.

*“We are under extreme stress, especially moms... first of all for us moms, who first have to prove that - you know what - I do everything and have even more power... Because... right now mothers have to bear a huge burden. Because it's not that they have to play only their role as worker or only their role as mom, they have too many roles... Everything is not easy peasy... as all think that you know what? 'It's easy' or 'You can do everything.' No, we cannot do everything, no, we're having a hard time...”* (Aphrodite)

Melina agrees with Aphrodite and talks about the exhaustion that results from the increased duties. At the same time, however, she stresses the need for mothers to stay calm trying to do all that they did pre-pandemic but at a greater degree.

*“...what I feel is the last straw right now is that we are all very tired... For us moms who have the responsibility to make sure the baby doesn't get something that's dirty or possibly contaminated. I'm tired*



*of worrying, I'm tired of being anxious. Did I clean? Did I wipe? Did I spray..." and "... You have to be a much cooler mom right now... It's just that the condition of the pandemic is to do all this calmly, at a much higher intensity". (Melina)*

This extra pressure, along with being confined at home, creates tension and affects mothers' willingness to interact with their children the way they did pre-pandemic. Athena says that *"I was very patient with my children... I can't keep on trying to do this anymore, I have no strength, I have no nerve anymore..."* Aphrodite considers herself *"the worst mother"* when there is tension in the house, especially when she yells and tries to end it so that *"it doesn't spread throughout the house"*. On the other hand, for Cleo home confinement contributes to the quick resolution of conflicts as *"...we don't argue so easily because we know it's not so easy to get up and leave..."*.

The change in the children's daily routines due to the closure of schools and the beginning of remote education (for elementary school children, online classes started in the afternoon) exacerbated an already difficult situation. Mothers had a hard time disciplining their children. Electra, Athena, and Sophia admit their difficulty in setting limits to their children, not only because their daily routine has been disrupted but mostly because mothers themselves are emotionally exhausted and feel that they are not successful in their role.

*"There are times when I completely let myself go, let myself be a bad mom let's say, who lets her child eat chips and watch TV because I just can't do anything at that moment... I had left him without having done his homework sometimes and I feel bad, so much that I did not have time, even though I am at home, I did not have time and left him without having done his homework". (Electra)*

*"...I am now TIRED of negotiating, no, it will be a quarter to ten... and their eating habits have changed a lot." (Athena)*

*"...I feel like I'm so exhausted I can't set boundaries. ...I don't even set them, I don't have the courage to set boundaries." (Sophia)*

Sophia also talks about her hard time handling new roles she had to take on, such as the role of teacher. She found herself renegotiating with her child responsibilities and tasks that were disputed and settled before the pandemic.

*"That is, I feel that I am assigned roles up to which I can't live... just as things were indeed flowing, not by themselves, I had them flowing, I had set them up, I had built them, suddenly I am called to build them again from scratch. And to fight about what he should do, while this has been already accomplished." (Sophia)*

## **2. Feeling trapped**

Being confined at home for a long time has resulted in feelings of entrapment and helplessness, which were exacerbated by the lack of external sources of child care. This lack of child care resources was a major concern for working mothers because they were the ones who had to deal with the children being constantly at home with them.

Aphrodite compares her daily routine to "Groundhog Day", as events that have happened before happen again, in what seems to be exactly the same way and this keeps going on for a long time. This repetition of every day adds to her feeling of entrapment; she equates her life with incarceration.

*"You are in Groundhog Day... over and over and over and over again and you say 'I have no choice, it will pass too, it will pass' and you simply go in circles...I feel that it is like - let me put it this way- we are imprisoned and allowed to go out to a huge yard..." (Aphrodite)*

Athena remembers that her multiple roles stressed her out even before the pandemic, but she had alternatives; she could do things outside the house (with friends) which helped her to recharge her energy and go back home more ready to bear her family responsibilities. She is alone in this daily struggle, pre-pandemic and amid the pandemic.

*"...I'm trapped inside a house and I have to do everything, I got no help before and in general I get no help...nothing, zero... I do everything by myself and I've been having all this stress and the multiple roles even before the lock-down. I simply had the alternative to go for coffee with my friend or to go for drinks one night after the office with a friend until 11[pm]... Now that I can't go anywhere, I feel trapped..." (Athena)*

Dido and Electra asked for help from family members or a professional child carer so that they could do their job without any distraction and at the same time take care of their children "by proxy". Sophia also gets

help from her immediate family, but her feelings are ambivalent. She talks about feeling trapped, not only physically but psychologically as well. “I have been trapped in my kitchen, a two-by-two room literally” she recounts. Her having to redefine her daily routine in very specific ways to be able to cope with her job makes her feel that she has lost control.

### **3. Need for personal time and return to "normalcy"**

Because they feel trapped at home, working mothers report their need to go back to "normalcy", since in pre-pandemic times they had time to socialize, to be by themselves, and to do things that were of interest to them. These strategies allowed them to be in a good mood and feel satisfied with their lives.

Sophia stresses the importance of having time for herself and equates going back to the pre-pandemic way of life with being in charge of one's life again. All other participants agree with it. They all talk about the lack of personal time, the ability to do things for themselves and by themselves. This presents as an extra challenge during this time.

*“It makes you feel that you have no time for you all this. Even the trip [to work] which is an hour-long...which was the worst thing when I had to do it... even this was personal time. That is, ...to be you with yourself... to feel that you are in charge of your life.” (Sophia)*

Aphrodite expresses her need to feel that she is not only a mother but a wife as well. Ifigenia and Cleo long for the physical contact that face-to-face interactions entail. Dido also misses her social contacts but she uses her logic and tries to focus on the positive things, for example going in her yard after lunch to enjoy her drink while her kids are playing.

## **Discussion**

The study highlights, through the accounts of contemporary working mothers in Greece, how they navigate the ideals of mother and worker during the COVID-19 pandemic. This global health crisis gave prominence, even more than before, to the conflict between "good mother" and "good worker" (Whiley et al., 2021), as it forced mothers back home, the place where only caregiving must exist according to the "intensive motherhood" ideology (Hays, 1996).

Working mothers in this study talked about the new working reality that was imposed on them, teleworking. Despite this dramatic change in work conditions, their workplaces continued to expect them to be always available with plenty of time to spare (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). This inflexibility of workplaces reflects the "good worker" ideal, which requires a worker to be constantly available and to prevent the family from interfering with work at all costs (Miller, 2022). Participants also reported increased stress during the pandemic, due to home confinement and the need for changes in daily life to meet work demands, which resonates with other studies (Clark et al., 2021; Hadjicharalambous et al., 2021; O' Sullivan et al., 2022; Prime et al., 2020). Furthermore, they viewed adjusting to the new working reality as their personal responsibility, since they had to make the effort to keep the worker role separate from the mother role and to set priorities (Bateman & Ross, 2021; Brower, 2021; Whiley et al., 2021). It seems as if a working mother needs to think along the lines of "there is work to be done, and this takes precedence no matter the cost". The mother needs to adjust to the worker and not the other way round, because choosing to be a "working mother" means that paid work is more important than caregiving (Dillaway & Paré, 2021). Even before the pandemic, women were socially required to choose between being "working mothers" and "stay-at-home mothers" as “women are socially constructed as either work-oriented or family-oriented, not both” (Garey, 1996 in Dillaway & Paré, 2021, p.2).

Multitasking was another major challenge that working mothers had to face due to mandatory home confinement and teleworking. Working mothers spoke of having to perform in one place, their home, all the duties and responsibilities that they had even before the pandemic, a finding that is in agreement with other studies (Dillaway & Paré, 2021; Friedman et al., 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Rohl, 2021). In the beginning, working mothers thought that they could continue doing whatever they were doing before, but long-term home confinement proved them wrong and brought exhaustion, as multitasking proved impossible to do after a while (Hillier & Greig, 2020). Women internalize the societal expectation that they can (and should be able to) do everything. Working mothers especially have to work twice as hard as non-working ones to be considered "good mothers" who can manage both their roles without sacrificing one for the other (Christopher, 2012; Hays, 1996; Dillaway & Paré, 2021).

Accomplishing both roles while confined at home is an impossible task, so working mothers need to find ways out of this impasse. In this study, participants advocated their need to work away from home to maintain in a way their sanity. Their job allows them to socialize, have fun and keep their roles separate. When they perform all their activities at home, they appear to be perceived primarily as mothers, and all their other identities are pushed back. It is very important for the working mothers in this study to be able to do their job away from home so that they can satisfy their personal needs and care for themselves. This time away from home – despite the demands of their job – will help them, as they implied, to be better mothers and wives. They appear to construct an image of the ‘good working mother’ who sees her job “as benefiting the family” (Buzzanell et al., 2005, p.276), and not herself. It seems impossible for working mothers, especially under the current circumstances, to meet the demands of the “good’ worker” ideal.

Working mothers not only had to deal with a new working reality, but they also saw their daily life change dramatically. New, increased roles and responsibilities were placed on them with children being at home; they became teachers, psychologists, and entertainers -to name a few roles- along with doing all the housework, which intensified their stress and feelings of loneliness and entrapment (Ségeral, 2020). This multiplicity of roles and responsibilities centering around the well-being of the child reflects the ideology of “intensive motherhood” (Hays, 1996), which requires women to be mothers before and above anything else.

On the positive side, during the first lock-down (March-June 2020), working mothers viewed the mandatory staying at home as a great opportunity to rest and be more mothers than working women, echoing societal expectations that they should make their family a priority since they are at home and cherish the time with their children (O’Reilly, 2021; Prince, 2021: both cited in Dillaway & Paré, 2021). This, however, is another form of the “super mom” image (Dillaway & Paré, 2021) of the “intensive motherhood” ideology. Over time, however, participants pointed out that all this trying to meet these impossible expectations led to exhaustion, both physical and psychological, which in turn resulted in their inability to set limits and to prevent children from engaging in behaviors and habits harmful to their development (eating junk food, spending too much time in front of screens). They felt that they were not being “good mothers” no matter how hard they were trying due to exhaustion and lack of help. As Friedman et al. (2021) note, working mothers did not feel even “good enough” mothers during the pandemic, despite being present at home with their children, as their work took precedence and did not allow them to be attentive to their children’s needs. It is once again the working mothers’ fault that they fail, and their responsibility to try even harder. Working mothers once again have to struggle to meet the impossible expectations of the “intensive motherhood” ideology and get blamed for failing to live up to these (Cummins & Brannon, 2022).

To be able to manage – or even resist – these impossible expectations, participants discussed the importance of personal time, which became painfully evident during the lock-downs, as they had lost all their pre-pandemic outlets, such as leaving home to go to work, going out with friends, hiring babysitters, listening to music. These outlets helped them to stay healthy and feel good about themselves (Gajewski, 2020; Joyce & McCarthy, 2020). Working women need the freedom to perform their different roles the way they see fit for them. Otherwise, they become consumed by motherhood, and everything else fades away. Participants appear to challenge, in a way, the “intensive motherhood” ideology by focusing on their needs, thus leaning more towards the “extensive motherhood” ideology (Christopher, 2012), which was gaining momentum pre-pandemic.

## Conclusion

The experience of working mothers in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the focus of this study. Data produced by semi-structured interviews were analyzed using IPA to answer two research questions: (1) How did working mothers in Greece experience their dual roles, as mothers and workers, during the COVID-19 pandemic? and (2) How did these working mothers make meaning of their experiences in regard to competing ideologies on their intersecting roles and identities?

Results indicated that working mothers in Greece felt that they had been indeed “penalized” by the pandemic (Intrabartola, 2022), as they continued to be the primary caregivers while trying to meet the demands of their job. Participants talked about some of the major challenges that they faced during the lockdowns. The first challenge had to do with the adjustments they had to make to their daily life as they entered a new working reality, teleworking. Most of the women spoke of the inflexibility of their working environments, which means that they had to back down on their family and personal needs to make room for the new demands of their job. Multitasking was another challenge for the working mothers who found themselves once again performing

multiple roles, all at the same time and in the confinement of their own home. "Intensive motherhood" was a common experience for the participants even pre-pandemic; however, amid the pandemic, mothers had borne the brunt of at-home labor and experienced negative emotions in response to inequitable divisions of labor. This resulted in another challenge, dealing with being confined at home with no help from external sources and no personal time to regroup and regain their strength.

A common theme that emerged from their stories was the experience of loss of control over their lives and possibly a loss of the multiple dimensions of their identity which appeared to have been reduced to being "just a mom". Ideologies on gender and parenting that were present prior to the pandemic continue to affect working mothers' experiences during the pandemic. Collins (2019) suggests that social and cultural forces presume women to be primarily responsible for the well-being of their family, no matter what they may have to sacrifice.

Depending on their place of residence (urban/semi-urban), work conditions (teleworking/on rotation/in-office), and availability of help, participants appeared to have experienced the pandemic differently, which speaks to the importance of studying the experience and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through an intersectionality lens (Maestriperi, 2021).

There are several limitations to this study. Participants were all college-educated, cis-gendered women in heterosexual relationships who had access to the internet; also, they were not front-line or essential workers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate impact on women from lower SES and marginalized groups (Cummins & Brannon, 2022), the experiences of these working mothers might have been quite different. Future research should focus on more heterogeneous groups of women. Finally, technical issues, such as connection failures or the presence of other people in the room - due to the lock-down - may have prevented participants from disclosing thoughts and feelings.

A better understanding of the experiences of contemporary working mothers of minors in Greece in the midst of a pandemic will contribute to the design and implementation of targeted and evidence-based interventions during future health and other crises. It is important to continue this line of study as the pandemic is far from over, and its long-term impact is not known yet. According to Dillaway & Paré (2021), "(t)he long-term impacts of the pandemic on women, their activities, their locations, their identities, their livelihoods, and their well-being are still very uncertain, but it is clear that this "new normal" is a more intense version of the "old" normal, and mothers are not faring well (even if they are resilient and persistent)" (par. 36).

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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

# Εργαζόμενες μητέρες στην Ελλάδα κατά την πανδημία COVID-19: Η νοηματοδότηση της «καλής μητρότητας» σε συνθήκες lock-down και τηλεργασίας

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

“καλή μητρότητα”,  
Εργαζόμενες μητέρες,  
Πολλαπλοί ρόλοι,  
Πανδημία

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η εμφάνιση της πανδημίας COVID-19 στην Ελλάδα τον Μάρτιο του 2020 προκάλεσε πολλές αλλαγές στην καθημερινή ζωή. Τα καθήκοντα των μητέρων κατά τη διάρκεια της πανδημίας αυξήθηκαν δραματικά, καθώς η εξωτερική υποστήριξη για τη φροντίδα των παιδιών ήταν πρακτικά ανύπαρκτη. Οι εργαζόμενες μητέρες έπρεπε να διαχειριστούν τους διαφορετικούς ρόλους και τις ταυτότητές τους ταυτόχρονα, καθώς η τηλεργασία έγινε υποχρεωτική. Το άρθρο έχει ως στόχο την κατανόηση του τρόπου με τον οποίο αντιλαμβάνονται την «καλή μητρότητα» οι σύγχρονες εργαζόμενες μητέρες στην Ελλάδα, λαμβάνοντας υπόψη τις ιδιαιτερότητες της πανδημίας. Οκτώ εργαζόμενες μητέρες με παιδιά ηλικίας 3 έως 18 ετών από διάφορες περιοχές της Ελλάδας ανταποκρίθηκαν σε δημόσια πρόσκληση που αναρτήθηκε σε δημοφιλή πλατφόρμα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης. Συμμετείχαν σε μια διαδικτυακή ημι-δομημένη συνέντευξη κατά τη διάρκεια της οποίας κλήθηκαν να μιλήσουν για την εμπειρία τους από το lock-down σε σχέση με τον ρόλο τους ως εργαζόμενες μητέρες. Οι συνεντεύξεις μεταγράφηκαν και αναλύθηκαν χρησιμοποιώντας την Ερμηνευτική Φαινομενολογική Ανάλυση (IPA). Ένα κοινό θέμα που προέκυψε από τις ιστορίες τους ήταν η εμπειρία της απώλειας του ελέγχου της ζωής τους και πιθανώς της απώλειας των πολλαπλών διαστάσεων της ταυτότητάς τους, που φαινόταν να έχει περιοριστεί απλά σε αυτήν της μητέρας. Οι ιδεολογίες για το φύλο και τη γονεϊκότητα που υπήρχαν πριν από την πανδημία συνεχίζουν να επηρεάζουν τις εμπειρίες των εργαζόμενων μητέρων και κατά τη διάρκεια της πανδημίας.

ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑΣ

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