

“I have to think for four people”: Belgian Mothers’ Mental Labour during the Coronavirus Lockdowns

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ABSTRACT

This semester-long study explores the under-researched topic of mental labour among middle-aged Belgian mothers in the context of the coronavirus crisis’ lockdowns. Mental labour refers to the presence of a cognitive burden induced by familial responsibilities, and it is often more prevalent in women than in men. By means of one focus group and six in-depth individual interviews, this research uncovers the different mechanisms that Belgian mothers developed during the first two coronavirus crisis lockdowns to better cope with their mental labour. Through this research, we hope to raise awareness of the mental labour experienced by mothers and highlight the different ways in which gender inequalities are perpetuated in the household, as well as envision how a better balance of tasks performed by men and women can be achieved.

Keywords: mental labour; gender inequality; mothers and family; coronavirus lockdown

impacts mental labour can have on mothers, investigating this under-researched topic becomes urgent (Robertson et al. 2019). Making it less of an “invisible” phenomenon will help mothers feel supported in their experience of mental labour. Moreover, research on this topic can help advocate for a more equal division of cognitive tasks in the family since mental labour is a form of invisible gender inequality (Damingler 2019). Lastly, raising awareness about mental labour could enable educators and policymakers to be more informed when making policies regarding family life.

Since the interviews were conducted during the second Belgian lockdown (November 2020 to January 2021), the context of this study must be considered. During the interviews, our participants were referring to the first lockdown in Belgium (March to May 2020), as well as the second lockdown which they were experiencing at the time of the interviews. During the lockdowns, mothers had to deal with their employment responsibilities, as well as their familial responsibilities, sometimes without being able to disentangle these tasks. To explore this phenomenon, our research asks how middle-aged Belgian mothers coped with their familial mental labour during the first two coronavirus lockdowns. This research aims to uncover the coping mechanisms mothers developed to deal with their mental labour. To explore these issues, we conducted one focus group and six in-depth individual interviews. This paper first discusses the research methodology, then provides a literature review of existing academic research on the topic before highlighting our different findings: first comes an exploration of how mothers experienced mental labour during the lockdown, second is an analysis of the different coping mechanisms that they developed. Lastly, the conclusion suggests future implications about making the issue of mental labour visible.

Methodology

Our qualitative research is both exploratory and idiographic because we want to explore individual experiences without generalizing. Additionally, we take an interpretive stance because we consider mothers' experiences of mental labour and their daily lives as subjective:

I have to think for four people, including my husband, my children and myself,” disclosed Marion, one of our focus group participants. If mothers in a heterosexual family already had to take on most of the organizational management of the household before the coronavirus crisis hit, the consequent lockdowns did not improve their family-related workload. Before the lockdowns, most household chores and organisational tasks in families were performed by mothers, largely because women are expected to take on the caregiver role at home (Damingler 2019). During the lockdown, we anticipated a shift in these set roles and a more equal distribution of tasks could have been expected, since the father and the mother were, in many cases, both spending more time at home. Household labour in the family consists of domestic chores such as doing the laundry, cleaning, and cooking. However, it also includes cognitive tasks that are often overlooked: the invisible work of planning, thinking and anticipating household chores, family activities and needs (Damingler 2019). These cognitive tasks are referred to as mental labour for those who experience it (Damingler 2019). During the lockdown, even when the mother and the father had similar job-related workloads, most of the familial organization was still carried out by the mother (Emma, 2020). The unequal distribution of mental labour in the family was reinforced and highlighted by the fact that even when both parents are at home and have a similar workload for their employment, the mother performs a greater amount of familial labour compared to the father. The unequal distribution of these tasks is unfair; mental labour damages mothers' well-being, life satisfaction, relationship with their partner and their overall experience of motherhood (Luthar & Ciciolla 2015). Because of all of the negative

each experience is unique and has its own context.

We chose to interview mothers in heterosexual partnerships as our research explores gender inequality in the division of mental labour in the traditional nuclear family. Our research targeted middle-aged mothers, so we only selected participants between thirty and sixty-five years old. We conducted interviews in French to enable our participants to share their everyday experiences in their native language. As we both have French as our native language, we were also able to better grasp the nuances of their discourse. We gathered participants through convenience sampling by posting a message on Facebook and sending emails to acquaintances. We also used snowball sampling as one of our participants suggested that we interview one of her younger friends. To provide a better understanding of our findings to the reader, here is a brief description of the nine mothers we interviewed:

Helena (52): Helena has four teenagers. Her mental labour has significantly decreased since her divorce. She has a new partner who is more involved in the household.

Natalie (48): Natalie has three teenagers and one adopted child. She does most of the house chores by herself and is the main organiser of the family. Her partner only does the tasks he enjoys and helps with the finances of the family.

Marion (46): Marion has two teenagers. The house chores are quite equally distributed with her partner and her children but she is responsible for the planning of the familial agenda. She is very anxious about all the things she has to think about.

Pauline (30): Pauline has a five-month-old baby. She used to strongly experience mental labour. Lately, she read a comic about mothers' mental labour which made her realise what she was experiencing. She showed the comic to her partner and, since then, he has made conscious efforts to help her more with the family's organisation.

Yaëlle (38): Yaëlle has two small children. Her experience of mental labour improved since the lockdown was established in Belgium. Since

then, her partner helps her more with childcare because he does not spend time travelling to work anymore and, therefore, is more present at home.

Gaëlle (63): Gaëlle has five children and three grandchildren. Her experience of mental labour has worsened since she became a grandmother because she feels responsible for taking care of both her children and her grandchildren.

Véronique (54): Véronique has three late teenagers. Before her divorce, she had to take care of everything by herself because her partner was often absent. After her divorce, she struggled because she had to deal with her children on her own for four years. She suffers a lot from the lack of recognition of her children.

Fabienne (58): Fabienne has three children who do not live at home anymore. Since they left the house, her experience of mental labour has improved.

Candice (31): Candice has two small children. Her partner helps her often but she is still in charge of the familial organization. She does not experience mental labour adversely and is very optimistic about life in general.

We conducted one focus group interview with three participants: Helena, Marion and Natalie. The focus group was conducted online due to the Covid-19 restrictions. This focus group provided us with an initial insight into the topic of mental labour. Furthermore, it provided our interviewees with a safe space to discuss key issues together, and to possibly relate to each other's experiences. The sharing and contrast of experiences is a unique aspect of focus groups, and they often fill the void that individual online interviews can leave (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). Moreover, the different topics discussed in the focus group enabled us to develop an interview guide for the next six in-depth individual interviews. These interviews were semi-structured as we were open to new insights from our interviewees and were keen on adapting our interview questions. Before the focus group interview and the individual interviews, we asked our participants to sign a consent form stating the purpose of our research. Additionally, to respect the privacy of

our interviewees, we attributed pseudonyms to each of them.

We transcribed the interviews and coded them using a thematic analysis on Atlas T.I. We came up with fifty-two codes, which illustrated aspects of the experience of mental labour. We then contextualized our data by comparing it with existing literature. In the report, quotes were translated into English from French to meet university linguistic requirements.

While this study provides a focused understanding of mothers' experiences of mental labour, it suffered from some limitations. As we conducted our interviews in French and wrote our report in English, some linguistic nuances may have been lost in translation. Furthermore, mothers may have felt limited in expressing some aspects of their lives because of the age gap between us, young researchers, and them. We tried our best to reduce this limitation by creating a safe space at the beginning of the interviews. Furthermore, as we also identify as women, there was no gender barrier between us and our participants.

Gender, Motherhood, and Well-being

Many studies have investigated gender roles in the family and the unequal division of chores in the household, but mental labour specifically and its effects on mothers' well-being have more rarely been subjects of research. It is important to highlight the differences and the relationship between the concepts of mental and emotional labour. Hochschild (1983) was the first academic to coin the term "emotional labour" to refer to the regulation and management of one's emotions in the workplace. It can be defined as the suppression or expression of feelings in work settings (Beck 2016). Examples of emotional labour include flight attendants or waitresses who are expected to smile and be friendly in all situations. In the familial environment, emotional labour can be defined as skillfully reacting to different situations which demand emotional support (James 1992). Since women are ideologically associated with family care and men with the workplace, women are thought to be "the best people to deal with others'

emotions" (James 1992, 501). Hochschild explains that emotional labour can be part of mental labour, for instance if a woman experiences anxiety from remembering all the house chores she must do, it can be considered emotional labour (Beck 2016). However, the thinking, planning and management of household chores themselves are forms of mental labour. In this paper, we adopt this definition of mental labour, but also include emotional labour as a component of it.

Hochschild (1983, 33) explains that there exist different ways to cope with emotional labour; she identified "surface acting" and "deep acting" as two possible strategies. "Surface acting" consists of hiding felt emotions or pretending to experience unfeared emotions to adjust to a situation. The second strategy is "deep acting" and consists of changing internal feelings by shifting one's attention to the positive aspects of a situation. "Positive reappraisal," as discussed by Williams (2016, 16), is a type of deep acting, as one reappraises a situation as positive to protect oneself from the negative aspect of a situation. Lazarus (1993) explains that coping mechanisms enable mothers to address different aspects of a problem when feeling stressed (quoted in Williams 2016). A study by Williams (2016) found that single mothers experience more stress than married mothers. However, their coping strategies are the same, and included "confronting coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving, and positive reappraisal" (Williams 2016, 54). Seeking social support, for example, is a major coping mechanism of mental labour. The efficiency of social support is confirmed by Luthar and Ciciolla (2015), who found that emotional support, such as being comforted and fulfilled in relationships, is linked to lower levels of distress in mothers. Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) also found that leisure activities are essential for mothers' well-being as they enable women to take their mind off their familial obligations.

Many academics appropriated Hochschild's work, by exploring how mental and/or emotional labour affects mothers' well-being. Senior (2014) underlined that most parental guides and books expect mothers to feel happy

when they succeed in fulfilling their maternal role (quoted in Luthar and Ciciolla 2015). However, reality can be different as being a mother can be stressful, especially because of the “role overload” arising from the multiple responsibilities mothers must adopt in the domestic sphere (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015, 1818). Other negative feelings can impact mothers’ well-being, such as “parental guilt” (Luthar and Ciciolla 2015, 1818), which refers to the culpability mothers experience when they perceive that they are not spending enough time with their families. This disagreeable feeling leads to an inability to enjoy leisure time as they may feel guilty about their absence from the family. Additionally, mothers are not always able to enjoy their free time because they are constantly performing cognitive tasks to ensure the smooth-running of the family (Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi, 2005). Ultimately, the negative consequences of mental labour are relevant to our research as they may help us understand how they can be overcome.

Various academics have explored the involvement of the father in family life. As Pleck (1997) explains, the division of childcare is still unequal, and mothers take on more demands at home. Today, traditional roles have evolved, and it is common for women to have a job and achieve financial independence. However, this societal evolution was not accompanied by an equal distribution of family responsibilities in the domestic sphere and women still have to perform more domestic tasks than men. This lack of involvement of the father in the domestic sphere is referred to as “male absenteeism” by Rincón and Martínez (2020, 2). Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) observed that fathers allow themselves to have more free time compared to mothers. Additionally, when the father is willing to help the mother with the familial organisation, he often has the role of an executor whilst the mother has the role of a manager (Damingier 2019). In this executor-manager dynamic, the mother is responsible for the organisation, planning and management of the family whilst the father is not as involved in the familial management. Implementing an extended parental leave for fathers has proven to alter the unequal division of household tasks, both physical and cognitive, as well as society’s

perception of gender roles (Unterhofer and Wrohlich 2017). Indeed, paternal leave allows the father to be as present as the mother during the first months of the new-born and enables the father to settle solid habits of childcare. Since the involvement of the father is an important factor in the perpetuation of mental labour, exploring how mothers deal with male absenteeism at home, even when the father is always present due to the lockdown, is relevant to answer our research question.

Work/family conflicts can also arise because of mental labour. While the rate of employed women has increased, they are still considered the primary caregivers of the family (Traustadottir 1991). Therefore, mothers often experience a work-family conflict because of their responsibilities both at home and in the workplace. Verduyck and Van de Putte (2013, 352) introduced the term “role combination stress” to describe the stress that can arise from the combination of their job-related responsibilities and their family-related responsibilities. Furthermore, since house-related responsibilities are unpaid, they are often underestimated. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018) reported that Mexican women perform unpaid work three times as much as men. In these circumstances, a stable work-family balance can be difficult to achieve. Consequently, mothers sometimes question their priorities. When a family-related event requires one of the two parents to stop working, the mother is expected to put aside her professional aspirations to take care of family matters (Traustadottir 1991). Women are therefore also expected to take on low-waged part-time jobs and restrain their career opportunities to assume their maternal role (Rincón and Martínez 2020). This phenomenon is called the “sticky floor” (Rincón and Martínez 2020, 2). It describes the barriers imposed by social expectations on mothers, which prevent them from fully devoting themselves to their professional life. Therefore, societal expectations can encourage mothers to fulfil their caregiver role and put aside their professional goals, as combining both roles in the family and at work can become overwhelming. With the lockdown, mothers may have struggled to dissociate their job from

their familial responsibilities, as both took place in the same domestic environment. Exploring how they managed to deal with this special situation will give insight into mothers' coping techniques during the lockdown.

Finally, academics have also explored the different origins of mental labour. Cunningham (2001) found that parents' division of house chores tends to influence their children's gender role ideals. Therefore, children are likely to reproduce the parental scheme they were exposed to during their childhood when they become adults themselves. Most of the time, the repeated parental scheme is one in which the father is not as present as the mother. However, in Pedersen and Kilzer's study (2014), fathers declared that they would want to spend more time caring for their family. The researchers looked at this incongruity and found that mothers may put barriers to the involvement of the father in the family. This behaviour is called "gatekeeping" and refers to the attempt to control the interaction between the child and the father (Pedersen and Kilzer 2014). The study found that mothers reported a higher work-to-family conflict for their spouses than for themselves, which means they have the impression that the father's job is more demanding than their job. Consequently, women may voluntarily take on additional control and childcare to reduce the father's burden and affirm their maternal identity. Buzzanell et al. (2005, 266) further explore the topic of maternal identity, suggesting that mothers seek to maintain a "good mother image" by combining their professional aspirations and their maternal role. The maintenance of this status allows them to prove the success of a "working motherhood" (Buzzanell et al. 2005, 265) to their family and friends, which means they want to show others they are able to handle their job and their familial responsibilities. During the lockdown, mothers were always at home, in an environment in which their caregiver role was likely to be triggered by the constant presence of children. Therefore, gatekeeping behaviours might increase. The question of how mothers dealt with an increased gatekeeping behaviour during the lockdown is therefore relevant to explore.

Findings

Before diving into the mechanisms that mothers developed to better cope with, or overcome mental labour, it is important to gain some insight into their experiences of mental labour and how it impacted their daily life during the lockdown. Understanding the causes and the mechanisms behind the phenomenon of mental labour is necessary to justify and understand the coping mechanisms mothers developed over time. Therefore, the findings section first sketches out how these Belgian mothers perceive and describe their mental labour, and then outlines how mental labour evolved and impacted their life. Finally, we describe the coping mechanisms mothers developed, which are supported by literature.

Mothers' Day-to-day Experiences of Mental Labour

Most of the time, we observed that mothers have the role of thinkers in the family, which means they are in charge of the whole familial organisation and agenda. Marion disclosed the following: "I have to think for four people, including my husband, my children and myself." In this discourse, she stresses that she performs the mental work for all the members of the family; she tells her husband he should not forget to pick up the children, she reminds her children of an appointment at the doctor and, on top of this, she has to think about her own agenda. Moreover, burdensome thoughts seem to be present at any time: "It's a mental flow that never stops." This anxiety, derived from planning everything for the family, can be considered as emotional labour. Marion's example illustrates a mental labour that most of our interviewees experienced. More precisely, the word "anticipation" was used by many of our participants or was implied through examples of their daily life. In this context, to anticipate means planning events in advance to ensure a smooth and timely continuity of family life. According to Robertson et al.'s (2019) definition of mental labour, the anticipation of the needs of the family is included in the mental tasks mothers perform. Véronique illustrates this point with a metaphor: "It means I have to anticipate a lot, it is like managing a small business, actually. In the fridge, I have to deal with the supply, its

management; I have to make sure that it runs without any problems." In this metaphor, she portrays herself as the boss of her small enterprise, therefore implying that she has the responsibility of orchestrating the whole functioning of the family. Additionally, we observed that some interviewees felt responsible for maintaining a positive atmosphere in the family and consequently felt responsible for regulating their own and others' feelings. James (1992) referred to this as a form of emotional labour in the familial context. This was illustrated by Natalie who mentioned that she often puts her anger and stress aside to ensure a good atmosphere at dinner time. Furthermore, many of our interviewees explained that questioning how to raise their children well was part of their mental labour. Fabienne's narrative illustrates this point: "This is a significant load I think ... Is what I am doing good? Did I react well when he came to me when he was sad or when he has a particular behaviour, do I react well? Am I being coherent? ...A lot of questions, always when you educate a child."

Fabienne's worries are reflected in the concept of "metaparenting," a component of Robertson et al.'s (2019) definition of mental labour. In their study, they explain that "metaparenting" occurs when mothers reflect on the education they want to give to their children. Luthar and Ciciolla (2015, 1818) found that the general "role overload" arising from being the main person in charge of the smooth organisation of the family life can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety in mothers. Because they are constantly thinking about what they should be doing, many mothers are not able to enjoy the present moment with their children. As Yaëlle disclosed: "I have the impression that I am not fully enjoying the moment with them because I am always thinking that I should do this and this." Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) similarly observed that mothers enjoy moments of leisure less than fathers because they constantly perform cognitive tasks. Moreover, many interviewees disclosed that they experience culpability when they allow themselves to have some leisure time because they assume that the family should be the priority. As Véronique explained: "on Sundays, I had tennis tournaments and for me, it was

terrible because I had the feeling that I was abandoning my family." Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) use the term "parental guilt" to describe this tendency. This refers to when parents feel guilty for not spending enough time with their family, which can lead to high levels of stress. Lastly, for some participants, like Fabienne, mental labour can lead to physical and health consequences like a lack of sleep because of the constant distress. All in all, mothers' daily experience of mental labour consists of many intertwined negative feelings, which can negatively impact their mental and physical health.

Possible Causes of Mental Labour

The presence of mental labour in one's life can have different causes. The degree of involvement of the father in family life influences the amount of cognitive work a mother will have to perform. Most of our interviewees wished their husbands would be more involved in familial management because the mothers had the impression to carry this mental burden on their own. As Pauline explained: "All the things related to the housework were my responsibility more than his, the washing up, the laundry, the groceries, I had to do the majority of the chores." Pleck (1997) suggests that childcare and housework are still unequally divided between parents as mothers are significantly more involved in the family. According to Yaëlle, women notice more easily the housework that needs to be performed:

I always see what needs to be done, and he does not. When I come home, I see that the children's bags need to be emptied, that we have to clean their lunch box, that there is some laundry left to do...my husband comes back from work and just reads the newspaper for half an hour without noticing it. I think it's a women's thing to be overwhelmed with all these tasks.

In this context, the husband does not seem to share the mother's mental load. Yaëlle's story illustrates Rincón and Martínez's (2020, 2) concept of "male absenteeism" in the domestic sphere. Sometimes, however, a husband is willing to help with practical tasks. Candice gave

an example: “I organise in advance what we are going to do and how we will do it; he helps me by for example driving the kids to school. So, I anticipate the organisation and he usually helps me with practical tasks, but he does not help me with the planning of everything.

In this example, the mother has the role of organiser and manager while the father executes what she is asking without participating in the planning of the familial agenda. This phenomenon was recurrent in our interviews. Daming (2019) suggested that in the family, the husband adopts the role of an executor and not a planner, which is often the role of the mother. As explained previously, the organisation of the family therefore lies entirely on the shoulders of the mother because the father withdraws from the management of the family. Some of the interviewees explained this withdrawal of the father by mentioning the fact that men allow themselves to put their own needs first. On the other hand, mothers often feel the need to prioritize the family before their own needs. Even regarding leisure time, mothers often had less free time than fathers because of this prioritisation. Fabienne highlighted this idea by stating that, “I would also like to take some time to read. My husband allows himself to do so but I always have obligations related to the well-being of my family.” Moreover, some of our interviewees complained about an important lack of recognition for all that they do. While we were discussing this lack of gratitude from the family, Véronique started to cry, expressing her emotional fatigue. She disclosed the following: “So, you have to do everything, but you don’t have any gratitude, may it be from the children or the husband, it is a problem...it is very hard, and I suffer from it.” Thus, the father seems to play an important role in the perpetuation of mothers’ mental labour. If the couple does not work as a team to perform family-related tasks, familial responsibilities often lie on the mothers’ shoulders, namely because of the historical evolution of women’s professional lives.

Next to the lack of involvement of the father, the gender expectations regarding the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver can also be a factor playing a role in the perpetuation of mental labour in mothers. Véronique explained that she is part of a generation that has to take

on both responsibilities of being a mother and a breadwinner. According to her, this problem was different in the past and will be different in the future: “My mother was a housewife. In the future, family responsibilities will be more equally distributed. I am part of a transitional generation.” This quotation illustrates Rincón and Martínez’s (2020) point about the evolution of women’s professional lives and the perpetuation of an unequal division of work in the domestic sphere. If we include the unpaid housework in the total number of their working hours, mothers are working more than fathers because the housework is not always fairly distributed between the couple.

A work-family balance is, therefore, difficult to achieve and mothers may experience heightened levels of stress. Vercruyssen and Van de Putte (2013) use the term “role combination stress” to underline mothers’ stress that can arise from having to deal with their breadwinner role and their mother role. Almost all of our interviewees decided to reduce their working hours at one point in their life because they could not combine a full-time job with family obligations. Candice said: “No no, I can’t have a full-time job with all the things that need to be done.” Both Traustadottir (1991) and Rincón and Martínez (2020) suggested that since mothers are expected to complete their maternal role by taking care of the family, they often reduce their working hours and limit their career opportunities. However, our participants all said it was a choice they made with their husband and that they are satisfied with this decision. For some of our interviewees, the lockdown was an opportunity to reduce this role-combination stress because the father spent more time at home and started to help more. However, this is not what the French blogger Emma (2020) found. According to the author, mental labour for mothers actually increased because they had to deal with both their job and their family at the same time. In conclusion, the stronger the pressure from gender role expectations, the bigger the struggle for mothers to handle their work and family life. The work-family conflict therefore tends to inflate the negative experience of mothers’ mental labour.

Mental labour also arises from gender expectations regarding the role of the mother in the family. Since society expects them to be the primary caregiver of the family, they might want to live up to these expectations and take this role to heart. Yaëlle explained that mental labour stems from the mothers' control over the family's organization: "I think we put all the blame on men, even though if women take on this mental burden, it's because, one way or another, they gain something from it, maybe a certain recognition." Pedersen and Kilzer (2014) describe this behaviour as "gatekeeping," which is characterized by additional control and childcare from the mother. Buzzanell et al. (2005) suggest that it is used by mothers to preserve their image of a "good mother" and therefore serves to protect their maternal identity. This desire to maintain a good image is illustrated by Fabienne's words: "I give the impression to my family that I am a strong mother, so a mother that takes on her responsibilities, who does everything, it would feel strange to stop." The phenomenon of gatekeeping was also highlighted by Natalie who explained that, despite feeling overwhelmed by her mental load and the house chores, "[she] do[es] realise that [she is] totally responsible for this functioning of the family." However, she explained that it was hard for her to change these patterns of behaviour:

I do try to challenge myself and change things, meaning I would need to just stop doing everything and tell them to figure things out themselves...but I tend to still do it, because I find that I do things better, I do them more quickly, and at least when I do tasks myself, I know they are completed. Because sometimes asking others for help takes forever, and that irritates me because I like it when things are done.

Although it is not necessarily the case, mothers may have the impression that their partner has more demands from work (Pedersen and Kilzer 2014). Therefore, they may wish to reduce the father's burden by taking on more chores and tasks in the family. Although mothers may not be self-aware of this phenomenon, this belief might be an underlying reason for their gatekeeping.

Additionally, Yaëlle explained in the following quotation that taking on so much for the family also comes from her maternal instinct: "Maternal mental labour might just be something innate, because when a woman gives birth, she already gives so much of herself, and she may carry on this prioritization and care for others after the birth of her child." Here, Yaëlle explains that her maternal instinct requires her to continuously make sacrifices to ensure the well-being of her children.

Another cause of mental labour which was mentioned by interviewees is the perpetuation of observed schema. Yaëlle believes that individuals tend to copy their parents' behaviour regarding the distribution of tasks. She explained that "I know my mom was at the service of her five children, and my father not at all, and for my husband the situation was similar, so in many ways I think we repeat what we have known." Here, we can observe patterns of "male absenteeism" (Rincón and Martínez, 2020, 2) that tend to be repeated over generations. Indeed, Cunningham (2001) also found in his study that children tend to repeat the behaviour of their own parents once they are adults.

Lastly, a divorce can also be the cause of an increase in mental labour. Véronique disclosed that her mental labour increased after her divorce because she was left alone with her children and had to deal with the household chores on her own. She mentioned that "for the 8 years I have been divorced, I stayed 4 years all alone assuming all the responsibilities, it was very very hard." Marital status also has an impact on how women experience mental labour. Baxter and Alexander's (2008) study found that single mothers have even more difficulties dealing with work and family since they do not have the support of a partner for children and house-related tasks. On the other hand, in our focus group, Helena explained that after her divorce, she experienced less mental labour. She explained: "Since he is gone, I have one child less!" This suggests that her husband was comparable to an additional burden and that she felt relieved after her divorce.

Mental labour, cultivated by existing gender expectations, gatekeeping, the protection of maternal identity, parental scheme reproduction, or

a divorce can be an overwhelming experience for mothers. Therefore, mothers tend to develop different coping techniques to manage this mental labour.

Techniques to Cope with Mental Labour and Overcome it

Mental labour seems to be anchored in the functioning of some families; however, mothers develop different techniques to cope with it and better manage the familial duties. Firstly, many of our interviewees mentioned that they write lists to keep track of what needs to be done. For instance, Natalie elaborated on her use of lists: "I manage through lists, I make a lot of lists, grocery lists, lists of house chores, lists of my worries, lists of projects, that I'm afraid to forget...so my strategy is to use lists."

Another way to cope with mental labour is by engaging in leisure activities. Many participants mentioned sport as a way to clear their mind: running, swimming and practicing yoga. Marion explained she needs leisure time to solve her problems: "To really think about my problems...I need to have taken some time, done some sport or rested, and then all of a sudden, it's like crystal clear water and answers to my problems become clearer."

Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) explain in their study that leisure activities are essential for the psychological and physical well-being of parents. Furthermore, after mentioning negative aspects of their partners' behaviour, many of our participants were looking for positive ones. This coping technique is called "cognitive reappraisal" (Williams 2016), which refers to the re-evaluation of a situation as positive. For example, Fabienne explained that when she is tired of cooking all the time, her partner "takes the initiative of ordering food." She added that "at least he didn't force me to do the dinner, he is not someone who would force me you know, that's already a good thing." This quotation indicates that she is looking for a positive point in a negative situation.

Furthermore, some of our interviewees engage in self-control to change how they feel about a situation or pretend that they experience different emotions to deal with emotional labour. For instance, Natalie

explained that: "When I feel exhausted from doing all the house chores, I sometimes start screaming or get angry, but I tend to avoid doing it because I don't like when there is a bad ambiance." In this example she hides angry emotions to preserve a positive ambiance in the family. Hochschild (1983, 33) coined the term "surface acting" to define this behaviour, which refers to pretending to experience a different emotion. This emotional accommodation is a technique to cope with emotional labour, as the mother feels responsible for the family's well-being as well as for the surrounding domestic ambiance.

Additionally, many mothers share their worries and talk with friends, siblings, and colleagues to alleviate their mental labour. It enables them to realise they are not the only ones experiencing mental labour, to relate to each other, and support each other. For example, Véronique said that support among mothers is "our strength, for us women, it makes us realise that we are unfortunately all going through the same struggle." In the focus group, when one of the participants was describing her experience of mental labour, the other interviewees often nodded in understanding, or explicitly said they could relate. Indeed, Luthar and Ciciolla (2015) found that social support, and especially emotional support, are significantly successful in lowering feelings of distress.

When mothers feel distressed because of their mental labour, they can find different ways to cope with it, including planning ahead through lists, relaxing with leisure activities, cognitive reappraisal, self-control and social support. However, while these techniques help reduce the negative impact of mental labour on their well-being, they do not help mothers overcome mental labour completely. To overcome mental labour, different mechanisms can be put into place. For example, Pauline became aware of her mental labour a few years ago. By telling her partner about it, the family dynamic changed, and her mental labour decreased significantly. Pauline read a comic book entitled 'Fallait demander' from the French blogger Emma, which translates into 'You should have asked.' It explains how mothers experience mental labour. As Pauline

explained: “it enabled me to put a word on what I was experiencing and made me realise that what I was experiencing at home was real and that it could be changed.” She asked her partner to read the comic and he realized for the first time that a particular division of labour, and pattern of thinking and planning had been developed in the family. Since that day, her husband makes more effort and participates increasingly in the family work and organisation. Similarly, Candice explained that communicating with her partner was key to having a fair division of the familial tasks.

Furthermore, many mothers decided to take a step back to delegate their work to other members of the family. For example, Helena once left the clean laundry in front of her children's door until they understood that she was not going to tidy it up for them. Similarly, Yaëlle said that “If I take a step back, he will take a step forward,” talking about her husband. Yaëlle shows that renunciation can be a successful way to install change and have one's partner be more present in managing the family.

Finally, many of our interviewees had the impression that things were improving for women and that women's cognitive burden is decreasing with time. This societal change may help more women overcome their mental labour. Pauline explained that compared to her own parents, divisions of chores in her own family are more equal. She said that “today there is more awareness” and that “even though it is not always equal between men and women, there is a feminist movement which pushes for change to happen.” Similarly, Yaëlle said in her interview that “my husband helps me way more than my dad used to help my mom; I feel like men assume their responsibilities nowadays.” A cross-national study by Scott (2006) similarly found that traditional gender roles were challenged over time with increasing education and secularization. These examples give hope that overcoming mental labour is possible and that mothers may be able to experience it less over time with better communication and increasing awareness about the issue.

Conclusion

The mental labour mothers experienced might have been present for a while but as Emma (2020) highlighted, for most women, the mental labour of mothers increased during the lockdown. Therefore, the issues they have discussed in the interviews were as much relevant for the situation before the coronavirus crisis as for the context of the lockdown.

We found that the six Belgian mothers we interviewed individually as well as the three Belgian mothers from the focus group experienced a cognitive burden continuously in their everyday life. Several causes for the perpetuation of mental labour were found: the lack of involvement of the father, the conflict between work and family life, the reproduction of parental schemes and the protective behaviour of “gatekeeping.” We observed that variables such as one's marital status, professional status, number of children and age has a significant influence on mothers' experience of mental labour. These different experiences and causes lead each of our participants to find ways of dealing with this burdensome mental labour.

This study answers the research question at hand by exploring the different coping mechanisms adopted by mothers, including cognitive reappraisal, surface acting, engaging in leisure activities as well as communicating with one's partner and friends about this phenomenon. We also uncovered how mental labour can be overcome through increasing awareness, education, and communication about this phenomenon. These elements seemed to help women go through a less burdensome experience of mental labour in their family. However, we found that although fathers contribute by helping with household chores, they do not seem to feel responsible for the cognitive work that comes with it.

Even though our data adds knowledge to the academic field of family dynamics, further research on how to tackle the unequal division of mental labour in couples is necessary. One area of research which would be relevant to explore is the maternity period as it is a critical period where the dynamics of the couple are defined and where caregiving responsibilities are distributed for the first time (Rincón and

Martínez 2020). To avoid an unequal division of household work from the beginning of the parental journey, Norway, for example, introduced an extended and paid parental leave to give fathers the opportunity to be more involved in childcare (Brandth and Kvande 2002). In this country, familial responsibilities are now more equally shared between the couple because men have a chance and the time to take on their paternal role. Researching the influence of policies related to the implementation of a longer parental leave for the father in other countries could shed light on a way to reduce the perpetuation of traditional gender roles in future generations. Moreover, giving more importance to the issue of gender inequality through a tailored curriculum at school could perhaps help children develop a more egalitarian attitude towards gender roles. A study by Whittaker, Adler-Baeder and Garneau (2014) found that boys and girls following a class about relationship dynamics and management at school are more likely to have a progressive attitude towards gender roles in the family, meaning their gender ideals would move away from traditional gender roles. Furthermore, interviewing fathers and exploring whether they perceive their partner's mental labour could help find new ways to raise awareness or communicate about the issue. Damingier (2019) interviewed fathers in her study but more research is needed to have a better grasp of how they perceive mothers' mental labour. Lastly, it can be useful to investigate whether homosexual couples experience mental labour and adopt dynamics similar to heterosexual couples. Ultimately, giving more visibility to mental labour could help raise awareness amongst mothers and make them feel supported by a wider community. The term mental labour has already been made more accessible to the general population thanks to authors such as the French blogger Emma Clit who published a comic book on this phenomenon called "Il fallait demander [You Should have Asked]" (Emma 2017). For one of our interviewees, this comic enabled her to understand and put a name on her experience. This example shows that progress is possible through education and visibility.

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