

# Shaping the Future: Insights from a Longitudinal Study on Women's Career Aspirations during Pregnancy and Postpartum

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**Summary.** This longitudinal study delves into the meanings of work for women during a transitional life stage. While the topics of opting out and opting in have garnered considerable attention, certain aspects of career development after childbirth remain underexplored. Existing literature often dichotomizes women into two primary groups, and some theories propose a three-group classification. However, such divisions may be overly simplistic and not universally applicable to all women. The objective of this study is to enhance the understanding of women's career aspirations. In order to achieve this objective, two waves of individual semi-structured interviews with ten women at two specific time points were conducted: during pregnancy and four to six months postpartum. The results of the study demonstrate that the meaning of work for the research participants varied both during pregnancy and after childbirth. Additionally, some participants had altered their career aspirations after they became mothers. The salience of the new identity as a mother is discussed as a possible precursor explaining adjustments in the career aspirations. This research enriches the discourse on work–life balance preferences by offering valuable insights into how early motherhood shapes women's career goals, decisions, and expectations.

**Key words:** transition to motherhood, women's work, career aspirations, work preference, work–life balance, opting out, opting in.

## Planuojant ateitį: longitudinalinio moterų karjeros siekių nėštumo ir pogramdyminiū laikotarpiu tyrimo įžvalgos

**Santrauka.** Šis longitudinalinis tyrimas gilinasi į darbo reikšmes moterims pereinamoju gyvenimo laikotarpiu. Nors pasitraukimo iš darbo rinkos ir grįžimo į ją temos yra sulaukusios nemažai dėmesio, tam tikri karjeros vystymosi po gimdymo aspektai tebėra nepakankamai ištirti. Esama literatūra dažnai skirsto moteris į dvi pagrindines grupes, o kai kurios teorijos siūlo trijų grupių klasifikaciją. Vis dėlto tokie padalinimai gali būti pernelyg supaprastinti ir nebūtinai pritaikomi visoms moterims. Šio tyrimo tikslas – giliau suprasti moterų karjeros siekius. Siekiant šio tikslo buvo atlikti dviejų bangų – nėštumo metu ir nuo keturių iki šešių mėnesių po gimdymo – individualūs pusiau struktūrizuoti interviu su dešimčia moterų. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad darbo reikšmė tyrimo dalyvių atžvilgiu skyrėsi tiek nėštumo metu, tiek po gimdymo. Be to kai kurios dalyvės tapusios motinomis pakeitė savo karjeros siekius. Naujos motinos tapatybės svarba aptariama kaip galimas paaiškinimas, kodėl keičiasi karjeros siekiai. Šis tyrimas praturtina darbo ir asmeninio gyvenimo pusiausvyros pasirinkimų diskursą, pateikdamas vertingų įžvalgų, kaip ankstyvoji motinystė formuoja moterų karjeros tikslus, sprendimus ir lūkesčius.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** perėjimas į motinystę, moterų darbas, karjeros siekiai, darbo prioritetai, darbo ir asmeninio gyvenimo derinimas, pasitraukimas iš darbo rinkos, grįžimas į darbo rinką.

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## Introduction

The trajectory of a woman's career undergoes a profound reevaluation during transformative phases of pregnancy and early motherhood (Haynes, 2008). While existing literature has extensively examined the phenomena of opting out, originating with Lisa Belkin (2003), who coined the term, and opting in (Cabrera, 2007) in the context of women's careers, there remains a noticeable gap in our understanding of the intricate dynamics that unfold during the postpartum period.

In navigating the multifaceted landscape of women's career development after childbirth, existing theories have tended to categorize women into simplistic binary (opting out vs. opting in) or trinary (for instance, preference theory developed by Catherine Hakim, 2000) groups. However, such classifications may oversimplify the diverse and individualized experiences of women during this critical juncture. This study aims to transcend these categorizations by exploring how the career aspirations of women are influenced by transition to parenthood. Numerous researchers have documented a tendency for individuals to adopt more traditional views after becoming parents (Fox, 2009; Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012; Endendijk et al., 2017; Buchler et al., 2017; Solera & Mencarini, 2018; Lockman, 2019), particularly after the birth of the first child (Katz-Wise et al., 2010). Furthermore, this phenomenon occurs even among egalitarian parents (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012). While the career focus of women may change over time for reasons beyond parenthood, it is equally important to explore how parenthood affects women's career aspirations.

This longitudinal study seeks to delve into the nuanced meanings of work for women during the pivotal life stage. Since up to thirty percent of women who leave the labor market cite 'rearing children as their sole reason for opting out' (Cabrera, 2007, 218), the study aims to answer the question of how motherhood influences the career aspirations of women, particularly in terms of their work-life balance *preferences* (elsewhere referred to as *work centrality* (e.g., Van Egdom et al., 2023)). A longitudinal qualitative research method was adopted, as interviewing the research participants at different points in time allows to grasp the changes in anticipation about the future career path.

The paper is structured as follows. First, an overview of scientific literature on transition to motherhood is provided. Then, a short elaboration on different theories about career aspirations of women is discussed, followed by the research methodology and the presentation of the research findings. Finally, the results are discussed in the light of existing literature on women's career aspirations and employment choices.

## Transition to motherhood

The transition to motherhood is a momentous event in a woman's life, with far-reaching implications for self-definition and lifestyle (Bailey, 1999; Laney et al., 2015). A shift in focus becomes apparent after childbirth, as women, following the observations by Zdolska-Wawrzkiwicz and co-authors (2020), concentrate less on themselves and more

on cultivating their relationship with the child. Similarly, the findings of a research in Sweden indicate that transition to motherhood may lead in ‘redistribution of priorities’ (Evertsson, 2012).

Egdom et al. (2023) contribute to this topic by discussing the concept of role centrality, highlighting the prioritization of a specific role in one’s hierarchy and the subsequent preference for allocating resources. The complexity of the identity transition to motherhood is further illuminated by Hennekam et al. (2019), who stress the multi-level factors influencing this process. The researchers found that partner support and a woman’s career aspirations intertwine to shape her self-perception. The study reveals that women, depending on their educational and occupational status, may prioritize either their work or maternal identity, highlighting the intricate interplay of these elements (Hennekam et al., 2019).

As pregnancy progresses, women actively begin formulating their maternal and vocational identities, decisions that will guide their path as working mothers’ post-maternity leave (Ladge et al., 2012). Therefore, the intricate interplay of identity elements, as illuminated by these various studies, emphasizes the need for a holistic understanding of women’s career aspirations during the profound transition to motherhood. From the pivotal role of partner support to the cultural contexts influencing childcare perceptions, each factor contributes to the complex tapestry shaping a woman’s professional and maternal identity.

## Theories regarding women’s career aspirations

In the realm of women’s career aspirations following the transition to parenthood, the discourse takes a nuanced turn as we explore the concept of “*opting out*.” Coined by Belkin in 2003, the term “opt-out” gained prominence as women were observed leaving high-paying, high-profile careers to embrace the role of “*stay-at-home moms*” (Belkin, 2003). This phenomenon, often referred to as the “*opt-out revolution*,” has become an integral part of women’s career-related vocabulary.

Examining the opting-out trend engenders a rich debate, as highlighted by Byker (2016), who challenges the notion of an abrupt change in opting out. By utilizing the Survey of Income and Program Participation, Byker explores birth-related career interruptions over three decades and asserts that, rather than a revolution, the opting-out pattern has seen substantial and sustained interruptions for mothers across all educational categories. This challenges the narrative of a revolutionary shift, framing it more as an opt-out continuation.

Introducing an additional dimension to the dialogue, Cabrera’s study (2007) challenges the conventional belief that women predominantly opt out of the workforce due to child-rearing responsibilities. The study reveals that only 35 percent of women who discontinued working cited rearing children as their exclusive reason for opting out, while a substantial 62 percent reported a shift in their career focus. This challenges the notion of a single, overarching reason for opting out and highlights the dynamic nature of women’s career decisions.

Further insights into women's career choices emerge through career models such as boundaryless and protean careers, discussed by Zimmerman and Clark (2016). These models emphasize individual agency in shaping careers, with boundaryless careers transcending organizational constraints, and protean careers being driven by personal rather than organizational goals. Adding another layer to the discussion, the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) incorporates career interruptions, employment gaps, and opt-outs. Zimmerman and Clark (2016) discuss the KCM's three main needs: authenticity, balance, and challenge, which women prioritize based on changing circumstances in their lives.

Hakim preference theory stands as another influential perspective. In Hakim's framework, women are viewed as active agents making individual choices that align with their preferences, emphasizing the importance of personal agency in shaping career trajectories. According to Hakim (2000), women, when provided with genuine choices, tend to align themselves with one of three distinct lifestyles: home-centered, work-centered, or adaptive, driven by their motivations, life goals, attitudes, and values rather than being solely influenced by social class. While preference theory provides a valuable lens for understanding women's career choices, it is not met without criticism. Lewis and Simpson (2016) argue that preference theory contributes to constructing a postfeminist subjectivity based on an agentic and 'choosing' femininity, potentially oversimplifying the intricate factors influencing women's decisions. Kossek et al. (2017) critique, similarly, emphasizes the importance of considering both personal preferences and external constraints in explaining women's labor market choices.

Delving into the "opt-out revolution," career models, and agency provides foundational insights into women's career aspirations and decision-making. However, these sociological perspectives highlight that the debate may not be conclusively settled, suggesting a need for additional research to explore the intricate dynamics governing women's professional paths.

## **The research method and data collection**

In order to investigate it deeper whether women's career aspirations change after their first child is born and how, a qualitative research method was chosen. A longitudinal research design was considered to be the most appropriate since data might be collected at different points in time, eliminating the ambiguity of causal influence, at least to some extent, knowing what factors come first and make influence (Bryman, 2008, 50-51), The qualitative data analysis allows for the identification of discourses through which identities are constructed, and the longitudinal approach allows for grasping the development of a particular narrative over time (Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Ten women were interviewed between May 2021 and December 2022. Two waves of interviews were conducted approximately six to ten months apart. The second wave of the research occurred after four to six months postpartum. It allowed participants to adjust to their new role as mothers avoiding the potentially stressful initial postpartum months (Vismara et al., 2016). All research participants (further – research partici-

parent) were pregnant at the time of the first interview. For the purpose of the research, it was crucial that the research participant would be expecting their first child to spot any changes in attitudes after childbirth because other studies had demonstrated that the most noticeable change occurs in first-time parents (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012; Katz-Wise et al., 2010; Solera & Mencerini, 2018). Throughout the research, all ten women successfully gave birth to healthy babies, including a set of twins.

Although convenience sampling was used to recruit potential research participants, they were diverse in their characteristics. Detailed characteristics of the research participants are provided below (see Table 1).

Table 1. The characteristics of the research participants

Changed name (age)	The place of residence/ Level of education	Marital status/ Number of children born	Employment status (field of the last occupation) – 1st wave	Parental leave/ employment – 2nd wave	Breast-feeding	Partner: employment status <sup>1</sup> / engagement in childcare <sup>2</sup>
Clara (28)	City, LT/ BA	Married/ 1	Not working (entrepreneur)	On parental leave officially/ not working	Yes	In full-time employment (remote work possibility)/ took 30 days of paternity leave (during the first month postpartum)
Iris (28)	City, LT/ MA	Married/ 2	In full-time employment (artist)	On parental leave officially/ began working occasionally for a few hours per month after four months postpartum	Yes	Officially both parents were on parental leave but in reality partner's share of childcare had been minimal <sup>3</sup> (except the first month postpartum).
Julia (44)	City, LT/ MA	Married (for the 2nd time)/ 1	In full-time employment and working extra hours (mental health service)	On parental leave officially/ began working for a couple of hours a week after two months postpartum	Yes	In irregular employment, thus had been spending a lot of time at home and engaging actively in childcare but no official paternity or parental leave taken
Victoria (23)	City, LT/ MA	Married / 1 (had an experience of being a guardian of a child)	In full-time employment (public sector)	On parental leave officially/ not working	Yes	In full-time employment/ took 30 days of paternity leave (during the first month postpartum)
Kate (31)	City, Norway/ High School	Married/ 1	Not working (beauty service)	Not on parental leave officially due to not having met the conditions/ not working	Yes	In full-time employment (remote work possibility), active engagement in childcare during free time but no official paternity or parental leave.

Changed name (age)	The place of residence/ Level of education	Marital status/ Number of children born	Employment status (field of the last occupation) – 1st wave	Parental leave/ employment – 2nd wave	Breast-feeding	Partner: employment status/ engagement in childcare
Lydia (41)	City, LT/ PhD	Married (for the 2 <sup>nd</sup> time)/ 1	In full-time employment (education sector)	On parental leave officially for the first four months postpartum/ began working part-time after four months postpartum	Not directly but extracting breast-milk with a breast pump	In full-time employment/ took 30 days of paternity leave (during the first month postpartum) and two months of parental leave when the baby was 4–6 months old
Nina (28)	City, LT/ BA	Married/ 1	In part-time employment (marketing sector)	On parental leave officially/ not working	No	In full-time employment/ took 30 days of paternal leave, actively involved in childcare during free time
Gloria (26)	City, LT/ BA	Married/ 1	In full-time employment (public sector)	On parental leave officially/ not working	Yes	In full-time employment as a long-distance driver thus is away from home for extended periods of time/ took 30 days of paternal leave (during the first month postpartum)
Edith (33)	A rural area, UK/ BA	Cohabiting/ 1	Not employed (catering sector)	Not on parental leave officially due to not having met the conditions/ not working	Yes	In part-time employment/ no paternity or parental leave taken, relatively little involvement in childcare
Tiffany (25)	City, LT/ BA	Married/ 1	Not employed (did not have work experience)	Not on parental leave officially due to not having met the conditions/ not working	Yes	In full-time employment (remote work possibility)/ no official paternity or parental leave taken but did not work for the first month postpartum and actively engaged in childcare during free time

<sup>1</sup> At the time of both waves of the research unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Parental leave policy in Lithuania in 2021 allowed for two main options: one year long and two year long paid parental leave that mother and father could use interchangeably according to their needs. Additionally, thirty days of paternity leave was also an option to use for fathers up to the child is one year old.

<sup>3</sup> According to the research participant she was responsible for approximately 80 per cent of total childcare.

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA 2022. The thematic analysis approach was adopted since it serves as a technique to discern and structure essential themes from qualitative data, aiming to elucidate a phenomenon by spotlighting patterns tied to the research inquiry (Swain, 2018). The *realist's* ontological orientation was followed during the process of analysis as it allows for 'an understanding that language captures participants' experiences of reality' (Terry et al., 2017, 21). Three main relevant themes were identified leading to the establishment of the 'Tree of Codes' as a framework for organizing the coded data (see Appendix 1). By constant comparison between the two blocks of data – *prior* and the *postpartum* – research findings were drawn.

## The research findings

### *The diverse range of career aspirations*

In the current paper the broad theme 'Career aspirations' refers to the whole set of career-related topics (see Appendix 1) including employment of the research participant, working hours, working schedule as well as work satisfaction and future employment plans rather than to refer 'desired goals in one's career' only. First of all, following the suggestions in the literature about women opting out from the labor market to raise children, the research data was analyzed in the light of this theory. A diverse range of arrangements and attitudes about career aspirations were expressed by the research participants. On at least one occasion, a research participant admitted being happy not to work and did not express any willingness to go back to work for at least a year unless the couple found themselves to be 'in need for more finances' (Kate, 31). Kate (31) had been working in a service sector providing beauty services in an office at the comforts of her own home and already during the first interview said not to be enjoying her work as much as she used to. The research participant articulated having ideas about changing her occupation and after giving birth her decision seemed to become even more consolidated but still she had not taken any firm decisions regarding her future career at the time of the second interview..

Similarly, Edith (33) contemplated that she had '*a really good occupation*' but later realized that work in an office '*is not for her.*' However, even during the first interview she was very uncertain about what exactly it was that she would like to do and admitted that she did not plan to go back to work until her first-born turns four years old. She also seemed to become more decisive after giving birth expressing ideas to look for either remote work opportunities or to try something completely new like cooking. Edith (33) did not rush to take any certain decisions regarding her future career mostly due to the fact that she and her partner were thinking about having a second child in some not so distant future.

There were a few similar cases of a relative opting-out position but not as stark and obvious as in the case of Kate (31) or Edith (33). Julia (44), for instance, although having a fulfilling occupation was ready to engage solely in childcare for as much as she could wanting to 'enjoy motherhood and to relish being with the little one [because] time runs so fast.' However, as she explained, due to a request of one of her previous clients, she

began to work remotely for a few hours a week when her baby was a couple of months old. The baby was taken care of by her husband.

In a couple other cases, Nina (28) and Clara (28), more specifically, women also expressed a moderate satisfaction in stepping off work both during the first and the second interview. However, their decisions were related more to the fact that they were not very certain what they wanted to do next and took the period of parental leave as an opportunity to contemplate their future career aspirations. Nina (28) was open about the fact that she had not yet found an occupation or a career path that would be fulfilling for her. In a way she hoped that motherhood would become the area of total satisfaction but, as she shared during the second interview, it did not and her search continued. And although Clara (28) was not certain what she wanted to do after her two years parental leave period too, she shared her astonishment, how immersed in motherhood she found herself: *'I cannot imagine myself doing anything more fulfilling at the moment.'*

Gloria (25), on the other hand, was satisfied to have a break from work and her career aspirations remained unchanged during the second interview. She anticipated to return to work in a public sector after a year thinking a longer period of parental leave to be 'too long' for her. In addition, there were others who were very eager to go back to work. Lydia (41) was the one who stood out the most. During the first interview she planned to go back to work a few months postpartum and she did so, although for shorter working hours. When she did so, her husband took parental leave. Similarly, both Victoria (23) and Iris (28) were also expressing a great yearning to return to work but they stressed to have made a very conscious decision to spend at least a year on parental leave. And while Iris (28) with the support of her partner managed to work for a few hours time after time even when her children (twins) were a few months old, Victoria (23) did not have such an opportunity explaining that it was not possible for her to work part-time in her current employment. Thus she decided not to work completely for the whole year and to take firm decision on her future employment when her child would turn one year old. Victoria's (23) main concern was whether her child would adapt in the kindergarden well enough and she added that she would extend her stay on parental leave for another few months, if necessary, prioritizing the well-being of the child than her wishes.

Finally, in one other occasion, Tiffany (25) had just finished her studies and expressed having some career aspirations for the future but did not have any exact plans yet. And although during the second interview research participant mentioned that she has 'this feeling that I need to do something,' she continued explaining that 'it's too early now... We'll see how it goes.'

Analyzing varied women's situations and different approaches to their career aspirations, it had become clear that there is no easy way to classify women according to the dichotomy opting-out vs. opting-in mainly because, at least during the first months postpartum, most of the research participants were not thinking of themselves as 'opting-out' and becoming a stay-at-home mothers exclusively. Notably, all of those who began working early on, did so only part-time or a few hours per week or less. Only one research participant was deliberating an option of raising a child more than couple of years but the decision was influenced by procreational desires.

Examining the research participants' attitudes towards career through the lense of the preference theory, a more distinct orientations are revealed. Lydia's (41) approach to work could be clearly considered *career-oriented* as it was stable during both waves of the research. Kate (31), Julia (44), Edith (31), and Tiffany (25) exemplify the type of *family-centric* women prioritizing family dynamics over professional pursuits. On the other hand, only one of them admitted to be ready not to return to the labor market altogether, while others eagerly contemplated their future work trajectories *after* the period of parental leave would be officially over. Furthermore, Julia (44) started to work for a few hours a week even *while on* parental leave, thus raising questions of the correct classification according to the preference theory. Victoria (23), Gloria (26), and Iris (28) did not articulate strongly enough either of the two extremes and possibly would be classified as *adaptive* women.

However, it is hard to decide which type suits Clara (28) and Nina (28) best as they did not express a clear-cut preference towards their career aspirations in any of the three options but both of them articulated that their decisions regarding work would mostly depend on other circumstances: financial ones and their childrens' adaptation at kindergarten.

### ***Breastfeeding as a factor influencing work aspirations of mothers***

While conducting the second-wave interviews, it became more and more apparent that breastfeeding, as a pivotal aspect of motherhood, intricately intertwines with mothers' career aspirations. This is due to the fact that if a woman decides to breastfeed her children, she may find it challenging to pursue her career goals. At least some of the research participants found themselves in such a complex position

For instance, both Victoria (23) and Iris (28) expressed that, although it was not an easy journey of breastfeeding (especially for Iris (28), who had been raising twins), and they were very eager to go back to work, giving formula to their children was not an option for them. Both of them were very decisive in their minds about their choice to breastfeed and to give '*what is best*' for their babies. On the contrary, Lydia (41), being career-oriented, did not emphasize breastfeeding that much, although she also made efforts to feed the baby with her breastmilk, despite encountering major issues and not being able to breastfeed directly from her breasts but had to use a breast pump.

Interestingly, the research participants who could be considered family-oriented, if such a rough classification was applied, expressed no doubts about the length of breastfeeding and did not describe it as a factor that disrupts their career aspirations. In contrast, these women usually planned to breastfeed longer and to stop breastfeeding not after a certain period of time, for example, six months, but '*according to the circumstances*' or '*the desire of the baby*.' Some research participants even expressed slight confusion when asked about any plans to return to work more quickly: '*I can't even go anywhere <...> he is constantly holding on to the breasts*' – Julia (44). Two other RPs described it as '*natural*' and said not being able to even imagine raising children otherwise.

Nina (28) was the only research participant who stopped breastfeeding after a month of unsuccessful efforts to do so. Indeed, she was also the only one who admitted having difficulties in establishing her new identity as a mother, explaining that she imagined that motherhood would bring overall fulfillment to her but it did not. Moreover, as her husband had been actively engaging in childcare and encouraged her to go and have more free time to herself, she described her feeling as being *'redundant'*.

Collectively, these narratives underscore the intricate relationship between breastfeeding and career aspirations. Some of the research participants chose to breastfeed for longer periods of time instead of returning to the path of their careers sooner, despite the fact that professional identity also was a big part of who they considered themselves to be. For instance, in reply to the question of why her husband cannot go on parental leave while she would return to work, Victoria (23) replied: *'If I stopped breastfeeding [for such a reason] and gave formula [to the baby], I would devour myself... I'm convinced it is wrong [to do so].'*

## Discussion

Even though men and women play increasingly equal economic roles in society, notable variations persist in terms of earnings, the representation of women at top levels, and labor participation. Verniers & Vala (2018) highlighted how the so-called 'myths' associating women's work with threats to children and family life play a pivotal role in mediating the relationship between sexism and opposition to a mother's career. Also, it is well-documented that the global issue of the gender pay gap persists, and it is notably pronounced when it comes to parents with caregiving responsibilities (Kleven et al., 2019). Mothers consistently experience a decline in earning power, whereas the same is not observed for fathers (Lips, 2016). Grimshaw & Rubery (2015) argued that motherhood wage penalty hinders gender equality progress by potentially reinforcing the stereotype that women, not men, should sacrifice earnings and that these stereotypes permeate the workplace.

Since it is established that having children is one of the most important factors influencing women's earnings, the current research aimed at investigating whether and how women's career aspirations change after transition to motherhood. The research data suggests that the picture is not so straightforward since some research participants expressed relief and joy being able to care for their children exclusively without the need to work due to parental leave options or because their husbands would provide for the family. On the other hand, they did not plan to become stay-at-home mothers. Also, there were some research participants who started to work at least a few hours a week several months after giving birth while caring of their children remained their main activity. And still, others went on parental leave using it as an opportunity to reconsider their professional lives and future career paths.

The current research attempted to categorize ten of the research participants according to two influential classifications: opting-out (Belkin, 2003) and the typology pre-

sented in the preference theory (Hakim, 2000). The first attempt to divide the research participants into two distinct groups according to their career aspirations failed. It may be suggested that since the parental leave benefits are generous in Lithuania, women do not have to opt-out altogether because they have the opportunity to leave the labor market knowing that they can return to work after the break. Therefore, this kind of leave from active employment is usually not a permanent decision.

The results of the current research align better with the three-type classification suggested by Hakim (2000). Nonetheless, such classification also seems to be complicated and raises some additional questions: if women are not decisive about their career aspirations, to which type do they belong (as in the cases of Clara (28) and Nina (28))? Also, how to assign a type if a woman expresses different career orientations at different points in time, as some of the research participants, unexpectedly to themselves (as in the case of Kate (31)), changed their orientation after becoming mothers? Furthermore, although some of research participants drifted towards the family-oriented type after the transition to parenthood, but it is not entirely clear whether they will sustain such an orientation in the future.

These diverse orientations underscore the intricate interplay between personal preferences, family dynamics, career trajectories, and other important factors in which women differ from one another.

In line with the findings by Van Egdome et al. (2023), the current research confirms that career-oriented women seem to be the most determined to go back to work sooner. On the other hand, in relation to other factors, breastfeeding stood out to be a major one for some of the research participants of the current paper but the findings of research participant Egdome et al. (2023) do not reveal such tendency (authors admit that it might have been the case due to chosen methodology). Breastfeeding as a factor determining career aspirations of women may play a significant role because facilitating a smooth breastfeeding process is helpful in establishing their mother identities – ‘to be a mother is to breastfeed’ (Kuswara et al., 2020, 6). Hence, it may be argued that those women, who are determined to breastfeed their babies exclusively, develop strong identities as mothers and may be less attracted by working opportunities soon after giving birth. Furthermore, they may also *change* their work–life preference at least for some period of time. Thus, it may be the case that women’s career aspirations or work preference is a more dynamic notion rather than a static characteristic.

## Conclusion

The research has demonstrated that the attempt to classify women into simplistic categories, be it the two-type or three-type classification, although it has some value, also has some limitations. There is a need for further research to gain a deeper understanding of women’s attitudes towards work and the factors that influence them.. Moreover, the research method allowed gaining some insights into what role the transition to parenthood plays in women’s career aspirations. Indeed, some of the research participants did not anticipate that becoming a mother would have such a strong effect on their preferences.

On the other hand, there were also those who did not experience any major changes in their career aspirations as well as those who expressed feeling of uncertainty regarding their future career. Moreover, it must be added that gaining a new identity as a mother was challenging for all ten research participants. Further research exploring the dynamic nature of women's career aspirations could support the development of more adaptable parental leave policies, better tailored to the diverse needs of women.

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## Appendix 1. The Code Tree

- 1. Career aspirations:**
  - 1.1. Employment *prior* giving birth**
    - 1.1.1. Employment status
    - 1.1.2. Area of occupation
    - 1.1.3. Working hours/schedule
    - 1.1.4. Self-realisation at work
    - 1.1.5. Desires/plans for future employment, i.e. *after* parental leave
      - 1.1.5.1. Estimated length of parental leave
      - 1.1.5.2. Career aspirations
    - 1.1.6. Attitudes towards work/family preference
  - 1.2. Employment *postpartum***
    - 1.2.1. Employment status
    - 1.2.2. Area of occupation
    - 1.2.3. Working hours/schedule
    - 1.2.4. Self-realisation at work
    - 1.2.5. Desires for future employment, i.e. *after* parental leave
      - 1.2.5.1. Estimated length of parental leave
      - 1.2.5.2. Desires to change occupation/employment
    - 1.2.6. Attitudes towards on work/family preference
- 2. Regarding partner of research participant**
  - 2.1. *Prior* giving birth**
    - 2.1.1. Partner's employment
    - 2.1.2. Partner's attitude towards childcare [willingness/plans to get involved, according to the research participant]
    - 2.1.3. Partner's involvement in housework
  - 2.2. *Postpartum***
    - 2.2.1. Partner's employment
      - 2.2.1.1. During the first month postpartum
      - 2.2.1.2. During later months postpartum
    - 2.2.2. Partner's actual involvement in childcare [according to the research participant]
      - 2.2.2.1. During the first month postpartum
      - 2.2.2.2. During later months postpartum
    - 2.2.3. Partner's involvement in housework
      - 2.2.3.1. During the first month postpartum
      - 2.2.3.2. During later months postpartum
- 3. Other circumstances of life**
  - 3.1. *Prior* to giving birth**
    - 3.1.1. Plans to breastfeed
    - 3.1.2. Meeting one's parents [if applicable]
    - 3.1.3. Leisure time
      - 3.1.3.1. Leisure activities
      - 3.1.3.2. Meeting one's friends
  - 3.2. *Postpartum***
    - 3.2.1. Actual breastfeeding practices
    - 3.2.2. Meeting one's parents [if applicable]
    - 3.2.3. Leisure time
      - 3.2.3.1. Leisure activities
      - 3.2.3.2. Meeting one's friends