Navigating Intensive Motherhood: Inventiveness and Agency Among Low-Income Single Mothers

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Abstract. This article explores how the ideology of intensive motherhood is reflected in, and shapes, the experiences of low-income single mothers in Czechia. By focusing on this group, the study advances understanding of the diffusion of the intensive motherhood ideology and the intersectional aspects of social reproduction. We demonstrate that, while intensive motherhood norms influence maternal practices in Czechia, low-income single mothers respond with inventive adaptations and reframing that reflect their specific circumstances. These forms of agency of low-income single mothers are often overlooked when their mothering is viewed solely through the lens of resource deficits relative to the dominant norms. Despite precarious conditions, these mothers maintain a positive maternal identity and dignity by adapting, reframing, or, at times, challenging the prevailing norms of intensive mothering. Our findings show that, in striving to meet the dominant norms, low-income single mothers undertake a range of additional, highly emotion-, labour- and time-intensive activities on a daily basis, yet these activities remain unrecognised in traditional conceptualisations of intensive motherhood, which are largely based on white middle-class women. In the neoliberal context, however, these unacknowledged efforts contribute to their further marginalisation.

Keywords: intensive motherhood, low-income single mothers, subjective experiences, recognition of reproductive work, inventive strategies.

Intensive motherhood refers to the prevailing parenting standard that has spread across high-income countries in recent decades. It is based on the expectation that parents – primarily mothers, due to the gendered division of reproductive work – should devote maximum attention to child-rearing; they should invest significant time, energy, and

money in children; mothers should prioritise their children's interests above their own; and follow expert guidance (Hays, 1996, 122), all with the aim of ensuring optimal child development and future success.

While these norms are spreading across various socioeconomic and ethnic groups (Faircloth et al., 2013; Ennis, 2014; Budds et al., 2016), there is debate about whether they apply universally to all mothers. Some scholars view intensive motherhood as an ideology that affects mothers regardless of their positions within systems of inequality, oppression, or discrimination (Elliott et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2016). Others argue that it is primarily relevant to affluent, white, middle-class mothers who have the resources to enact these norms in daily life (Lareau, 2011; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). Additionally, evidence suggests that intensive motherhood manifests differently across cultural and institutional contexts (Loyal et al., 2017; Murray, 2015), and its content varies according to the mothers' sociodemographic backgrounds (Christopher, 2012).

This article contributes to ongoing debates about intensive motherhood and inequality by examining how this dominant ideology shapes the experiences of low-income single mothers in Czechia. We argue that these mothers engage with the norms of intensive motherhood but often adapt or reinterpret them to fit their personal circumstances. Such adaptations are frequently overlooked when their mothering is assessed solely through the lens of their lack of resources to meet the intensive motherhood norms.

This study extends previous research in several ways. First, it enhances the understanding of the spread of intensive motherhood norms in a post-socialist Central-European context, an area that has received limited attention. Although earlier studies indicate that the norms are prevalent in Czechia (Marková Volejníčková, 2018; Nešporová, 2019; Klímová Chaloupková and Pospíšilová, 2024; Hašková and Dudová, 2025), the extent of support for these norms and their social variation remain unclear.

Following the post-1989 transformations in East-Central Europe, parents may feel increased pressure to prioritise their children's human capital development. Furthermore, familialist family policy and ambivalent gender beliefs – which combine support for dual-earner families with the traditional views on childcare and housework (Begall et al., 2023) – may have reinforced intensive motherhood norms. The Czech family policy supports full-time maternal care until a child turns three by providing extended paid parental leave, minimal access to public childcare for children under three, and no provisions for sharing childcare between parents (Hašková and Dudová, 2025). This gender-conservative family policy context may have further entrenched the intensive motherhood norms.

Second, by focusing on the experiences of low-income single mothers, this study demonstrates that motherhood is not a monolithic experience but is shaped by intersecting identities. While middle-class, white, heterosexual mothers may face societal pressure to practise intensive mothering, mothers from marginalised groups often encounter additional challenges such as economic instability, systemic racism, and discrimination, all of which influence their engagement with these norms and shape their mothering practices (Duffy, 2007). Motherhood, therefore, cannot be understood apart from the intersecting inequalities that shape mothers' experiences and identities across different

social contexts (Collins, 1994). This perspective highlights the need to recognise the diversity of mothering experiences across racial and class lines.

Building on previous research, our empirical analysis reveals that the additional burdens faced by low-income single mothers in Czechia give rise to specific mothering practices that have not previously been recognised as forms of intensive motherhood, despite being equally child-centred, labour-intensive, time-consuming, and emotionally demanding. This study responds to calls to re-evaluate theories that privilege the experiences of white, middle-class women while marginalising those of women of colour and mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Collins, 1994; Duffy, 2007).

Third, by highlighting the classed manifestations of intensive mothering among low-income single mothers and examining their consequences in a neoliberal context, we show not only how the intensive motherhood ideology disciplines these mothers, but also how it contributes to their further marginalisation.

Intensive Motherhood in Dominant Discourses on Motherhood

According to Hays (1996), the intensive motherhood ideology is defined by three core beliefs: (1) children require constant nurturing from their mothers, who are solely responsible for their development; (2) mothers should rely on experts for guidance; and (3) mothers must devote significant time and financial resources to their children. Hays contends that this ideology disciplines and judges all women in the United States, across race and class, even if not all mothers adhere to it (Hays, 1996, 107).

More recent studies by Ennis (2014) and Faircloth et al. (2013) indicate that, in recent decades, this ideology has spread to other Western cultures and now encompasses all genders and classes, though not uniformly. While definitions of intensive motherhood vary slightly, it is generally characterised as highly child-centred, expert-driven, labour-intensive, demanding in terms of time and emotion, costly, reflexive, identity-shaping, and linked to consumer strategies aimed at maximising children's success, reflecting the acceptance of sole responsibility for a child's future success by mothers (Ennis, 2014).

Güney-Frahm (2020) adds that contemporary dominant discourses on motherhood also require women to balance the dual roles of the ideal mother and the ideal worker. This dual expectation is evident in the pressure on mothers to optimise their children's development while maintaining professional identities (Nagy et al., 2023). Mothers are expected to demonstrate resilience and positivity, while mirroring a broader neoliberal ethos which values individual achievement and self-sufficiency over collective welfare (Cappellini et al., 2019; Orgad and Benedictis, 2015). These demands often result in feelings of guilt and inadequacy as mothers strive to meet high standards in both caregiving and professional spheres (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2020).

Additionally, the commodification of motherhood has led to a burgeoning market for parenting advice and products promising to improve the parental performance and child outcomes. This trend is visible in the proliferation of expert-led parenting resources, which reinforce the idea that successful motherhood depends on consumer choices and

personal investment (Davis et al., 2019; Whiley et al., 2021). Such commodification intensifies the moral and emotional burdens of mothering by perpetuating the narrative that mothers are responsible for their children's success (Autret et al., 2023).

The ideology of intensive motherhood is closely linked to neoliberalism, particularly its emphasis on individual responsibility (Murphy, 2000), consumerism (O'Reilly, 2012), and status safeguarding (Milkie and Warner, 2014). Schmidt et al. (2023) observe that contemporary motherhood norms and mothers' resulting practices align with demands to sustain women's economic productivity, pursue self-improvement, demonstrate self-responsibility and self-control as 'good citizens', and raise children as self-optimised future citizens. In practice, it can be difficult to distinguish between maternal care that is 'good enough' and the expectations of intensive motherhood. Hays (1996, 5) notes that "modern American mothers do *much more* than simply feed, change and shelter the child (…). It is that 'more' with which" she is concerned. Ennis attempts to differentiate between 'good' mothering, as described by attachment theory and other developmental-psychological perspectives and "intense mothering that results in self-centred young adults and emotionally and physically exhausted parents", by concluding that "it is the degree of maternal involvement, the balance" that is key (Ennis, 2014, 5). When considering the impact of the intensive motherhood ideology on disadvantaged mothers, it is important to consider the boundary between 'good enough' and 'too much'.

Social Variation in Intensive Motherhood and Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Mothers

Although all women are influenced by the ideology of intensive motherhood, not all are able or willing to adopt all its norms in their practices, nor do they do so in the same way (Bennett et al., 2012; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012).

To clarify the extent of this parenting ideal's influence, researchers distinguish between the intensive motherhood ideology, its norms, and mothering practices. The ideology defines what is considered 'good' motherhood, while the norms represent social expectations derived from the ideology. By contrast, intensive mothering practices refer to mothers' actual behaviours and strategies. Considering both ideology and practices, Lankes (2022) argues that a third of American mothers are not influenced by intensive motherhood norms.

Upon exploring the factors behind variation in the adoption of these norms, Forbes et al. (2020) found that most demographic and social characteristics did not significantly affect attitudes towards intensive motherhood norms. However, mothers without partners were more likely to believe that only mothers can properly care for children, and that a mother should prioritise her child's interests over her own, compared to mothers with partners. This stronger support for gender essentialism and child-centredness – that is, the principal norms of intensive motherhood – among single mothers aligns with other studies indicating that minority and low-income mothers often go to even greater

lengths than others to provide 'proper' care for their children (Elliott et al., 2015; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

Similarly, Forbes et al. (2020) found that higher-educated American mothers were less supportive of child-centredness. Gauthier et al. (2021) observed a similar pattern in Slovenia, Estonia, and Great Britain, while data from France also showed that higher-educated mothers placed less emphasis on child-centredness than those with less education (Loyal et al., 2021). This tendency among higher-educated mothers may reflect a desire to balance intensive mothering with other priorities, such as self-realisation through paid work and more egalitarian gender beliefs (Forbes et al., 2020).

The norms of intensive motherhood can hold different meanings for mothers from various social backgrounds (Crapo et al., 2021; Klímová Chaloupková and Pospíšilová, 2023; Long et al., 2021). For example, the belief that children's needs and interests should take precedence over those of their parents may be interpreted different ways depending on the socioeconomic status. Unlike wealthier parents, low-income parents often face challenges in meeting their children's basic needs (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Randles, 2021). Socioeconomic differences in the emphasis on child-centredness may therefore reflect that lower-educated mothers focus more on fulfilling the essential needs due to limited resources (Elliott et al., 2015), while higher socioeconomic status parents prioritise their children's needs with an eye towards future educational and career success (Milkie and Warner, 2014).

The pressure to adhere to the intensive motherhood norms can lead to feelings of inadequacy and stress, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged mothers as they attempt to meet these demands without sufficient resources. This strain can negatively impact their emotional and physical well-being. Despite limited social support, many disadvantaged mothers embrace intensive mothering ideals to assert their identity and defend their parenting choices (Elliott et al., 2015).

These challenges are intensified by societal narratives that equate good mothering with financial stability and the ability to provide enriching experiences for children, which low-income mothers may struggle to offer (Manoogian et al., 2013). Consequently, the cultural discourse surrounding intensive motherhood often marginalises socioeconomically disadvantaged mothers and contributes to their feelings of inadequacy (Newman and Henderson, 2014).

Despite these challenges, low-income mothers often develop adaptive strategies to meet the demands of intensive motherhood. They use creative parenting approaches that, while resembling middle-class practices, are firmly rooted in their specific social contexts (Verduzco-Baker, 2015). This adaptability highlights the resilience of low-income mothers as they strive to fulfil these demands within the constraints imposed by their circumstances.

Randles (2021) notes that low-income mothers must devise inventive strategies to provide for their children's basic needs. However, such practices are typically overlooked in the traditional definitions of intensive mothering. Randles describes this as 'inventive mothering', which includes keeping children safe in dangerous environments;

carefully managing limited resources; weighing the pros and cons of legal and informal work, welfare, and monetary and in-kind support from relatives and friends; maintaining a sense of security amid instability; and fostering children's pride in their racial identity (Randles, 2021).

Consequently, motherhood for low-income women involves far more than the original concept of intensive motherhood, encompassing not only the provision of basic needs but also demanding mental, emotional, and moral labour. Intensive mothering ideologies therefore impose particularly high physical, cognitive, emotional, and social costs on low-income mothers, who often sacrifice their own needs for the sake of their children (Elliott et al., 2015; Henderson et al., 2016). Randles argues that these practices should not be seen as deviant or merely a response to a stigma, but as "reasonable, responsible, and resourceful tactics shaped by the precarious and dangerous conditions of their parenting" (Randles, 2021, 40).

As socioeconomically disadvantaged mothers face additional barriers in meeting intensive motherhood norms due to systemic inequalities and limited resources, the ideology of intensive motherhood reinforces social inequalities (Autret et al., 2023). It also overlooks the diverse experiences of mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting the need for more inclusive discourses that recognise and validate the parenting practices of low-income mothers.

Data and Methodology

In this article, we examine the experiences of low-income single mothers with the objective to understand how the ideology of intensive motherhood shapes their beliefs about what it means to be a 'good' mother and influences their everyday parenting practices. Our aim is to contribute to knowledge on: 1) the spread of intensive motherhood norms in a post-socialist East-Central European country; 2) the specific ways this ideology manifests in and shapes the lives of low-income single mothers; and 3) its effects on these mothers within a neoliberal framework. By focusing on low-income single mothers, we provide a critical perspective on the intersections of class and gender in reproductive labour.

Qualitative interviews are particularly well suited to exploring how people interpret and make sense of their actions. Our analysis draws on 50 semi-structured interviews with low-income single mothers of at least one child under 12, conducted in Czechia between 2020 and 2022. The data comprise two subsets selected from a larger pool of interviews with single parents. The first set includes 16 clients of a non-governmental organisation supporting parents; meanwhile, the second set comprises 13 mothers experiencing economic hardship, recruited via social media. The selected criteria were: 1) being sole caregivers and providers; 2) very low household incomes (below the poverty threshold); and 3) reporting difficulty to make ends meet.

The first group was interviewed in June 2020; 11 out of 16 mothers were re-interviewed in November 2020 – January 2021, and four of these participants were surveyed

again in November 2021. The second group was interviewed in May 2021, with six out of 13 mothers re-interviewed in November 2022 (see Table 1). Altogether, 50 interviews were analysed.

Table 1. **Research participants**

Single mothers who were clients of a non-governmental organisation offering support to parents					
Pseu-donym	Age*	Education	Employment*	Number and age of children*	Date of the interview
Adéla	41	Secondary	Unemployed, previously an administrative worker	1 child, 11 years	June 2020
Aneta	37	Secondary	Unemployed, previously a nurse	3 children, 11, 8 and 5 years	June 2020; December 2020
Anna	42	Secondary	Fixed-term employment – a mail delivery woman	1 child, 4 years	June 2020; December 2020; November 2021
Hana	42	University	Fixed-term employment – a social worker	1 child, 7 years	June 2020; November 2020; November 2021
Ivana	41	Secondary	Fixed-term employment – a clerk	1 child, 9 years	June 2020; November 2020
Kája	39	Secondary	Short-term work – massages	2 children, 9 and 5 years	June 2020
Karla	37	Elementary	Unemployed	2 children, 10 and 6 years	June 2020
Laura	29	Secondary	Employed – supermarket cashier	1 child, 3 years	June 2020; December 2020; November 2021
Líba	36	Elementary	Unemployed, previously short-term work in a call centre	1 child, 13 years (with disability)	June 2020
Marie	36	University	Parental leave, studies pre-school pedagogy	1 child, 2 years	June 2020
Nela	37	Apprentice-ship	Unemployed, previously short-term work in a call centre	4 children, 13, 10, 7, 4 years	June 2020; January 2021
Nora	34	University	Fixed-term part-time employment – a receptionist	1 child, 3 years	June 2020; November 2021
Sonia	37	Secondary	Fixed-term part-time employment – a teacher assistant	1 child, 8 years	June 2020; November 2020
Stela	42	University	Short-term work – a warehouse worker	3 children, 12, 9 and 5 years	June 2020; November 2020; November 2021
Valerie	32	University	Fixed-term employment – a care worker	1 child, 3 years	June 2020; November 2020

Zoe	27	Elementary	Unemployed, previously short-term work as a cleaner	3 children, 7, 6 and 2 years	June 2020; January 2021
Single mothers who experienced economic hardship and who were recruited via social media					
Pseu-donym	**Age***	**Education**	**Employment***	**Number and age of children***	**Date of the interview**
Alena	46	Secondary	Short-term jobs, previously a hotel receptionist (fixed-term)	1 child, 9 years	May 2021; November 2022
Barbora	43	Secondary	Short-term jobs, previously a travel agent (self-employed)	2 children, 18 and 6 years	May 2021
Beata	31	Apprentice-ship	Unemployed, previously employed as a waitress (fixed-term)	1 child, 11 years, pregnant	May 2021
Blanka	30	Elementary	Fixed-term part-time job in call centre	1 child, 5 years	May 2021
Dana	36	University	Self-employed (pet grooming)	2 children, 11 and 7 years	May 2021
Edita	40	Secondary	Unemployed; previously an administrative worker (before parental leave)	1 child, 6 years	May 2021; November 2022
Eva	37	Secondary	Unemployed, previously a small cleaning job; a nurse before the parental leave	2 children, 10 and 2 years	May 2021
Ilona	29	Apprentice-ship	Part-time housekeeper; previously a mail delivery person (before parental leave)	1 child, 5 years (with disability)	May 2021; November 2022
Jana	47	Secondary	Unemployed, previously a traductor (self-employed)	1 child, 6 years	May 2021; November 2022
Jitka	39	Secondary	Unemployed, previously an AirBnB host	1 child, 6 years (with disability)	May 2021; November 2022
Klára	47	Secondary	Employed as a cleaning lady (fixed-term), later unemployed	1 child, 9 years (with disability)	May 2021; November 2022
Petra	39	Apprentice-ship	Unemployed, previously employed as an assistant in a law office	1 child, 6 years	May 2021
Romana	33	Apprentice-ship	Unemployed, previously short-term work in a call centre	2 children, 7 and 3 years	May 2021

* Age, employment and the number and age of children are indicated at the time of the first interview.

Most participants' highest level of education was secondary, with a higher proportion of women with lower education than the national average, reflecting broader trends among low-income single mothers. Half of our interviewees lived in the capital or another large town/city, whereas the other half resided in villages or small towns, thus ensuring spatial diversity. All of them had low household incomes, and most worked in manual, low-qualified jobs, or precarious jobs (short-term contracts, low pay, job insecurity). Thirteen participants were unemployed at the time of the first interview. Almost all participants were from the ethnic majority, with only one of Roma ethnicity – which is a limitation that prevents us from addressing ethnicity in our analysis.

The interviews were conducted by telephone due to COVID-19 restrictions and the participants' limited access to online communication. Despite this, the interviews were sufficiently rich – likely because they were repeated two or three times, allowing trust to develop between the interviewer and the participant. The sensitive nature of the topic may also have encouraged greater openness during telephone interviews, as socioeconomic differences were less visible, and the participants could engage in routine care activities while speaking.

The participants were informed about the research purpose and the interview process, with the option to pause or withdraw at any time. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and oral informed consent was obtained for the anonymised use of their data in research and publication. The participants received a small monetary reward for their time. All interviews were confidential, recorded, transcribed verbatim, pseudo-anonymised, coded, and analysed in a single file by using *Atlas.ti* software.

The interview scenarios explored experiences of precarity, care practices and meanings, work histories, work–life balance, sources of support, coping strategies, mothering ideals, feelings about motherhood, and self-assessment. Developed by the second author, these scenarios aimed to understand how single mothers navigate their socioeconomic circumstances and parenting.

Re-interviewing was aimed to track changes in the participants' socioeconomic situations and perceptions of motherhood during and after the pandemic. The women were asked about the impact of the pandemic on their families, work, economic situation, childcare, children's education, psychological coping, and sources of support. However, this article does not focus on changes between the interview rounds.

The semi-structured interview method enabled a focus on motherhood and precarity while allowing in-depth exploration of other issues that were significant to the participants. Although intensive motherhood norms were not explicitly included in the interview guide, they emerged as analytically significant during the analysis.

Qualitative data collection and analysis followed Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, which seeks to understand social phenomena through interpretation. This approach employs abstraction by weaving the conceptualisation into the description. Initial coding categorised the relevant interview segments into thematic categories, identifying new topics as they arose. This was followed by examining relationships between the codes, developing new concepts, and identifying the main categories

and their properties in order to deepen the understanding of low-income single mothers' experiences, agency, and consequences. As the narratives began to repeat within the main categories, category saturation was achieved. This provided deeper insight into how these mothers navigate and resist oppressive structures, assert their identities, and challenge societal expectations, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how systemic inequalities shape diverse experiences of motherhood.

Findings

We identified four main areas where the influence of intensive motherhood ideology was evident in the narratives of low-income single mothers: self-sacrifice (illustrated here through the example of feeding the child, as accounts of self-sacrifice were most pronounced in this context); providing a safe and stimulating environment; spending time for and with the child; and protecting the child from adversity. In these areas, the normative discourse of intensive motherhood was reflected in the participants' narrated beliefs about what constitutes good mothering.

While protecting the child's safety, nurturing development, and preparing them for life in society are widely recognised aspects of mothering and caregiving (Ruddick, 1989), the ideology of intensive motherhood provides a framework for examining how societies transform meaningful, reflective care into an exhausting, class-bound, and gendered moral standard. This standard demands that a child's needs should always come first; it requires mothers' self-sacrifice and reliance on expert guidance; and involves the emotional, physical, and time investment of caregivers to secure the child's best future success.

In the interviews, we observed specific parenting practices through which low-income single mothers met the normative expectations associated with the intensive motherhood norms. Although unfamiliar with the concept itself, they were aware of these norms and generally adhered to them, while sometimes also resisting. They demonstrated significant ingenuity, creativity, and inventiveness in adapting the practices through which they met the normative expectations to their circumstances at the intersection of gender, class, and family status inequalities.

Self-Sacrifice and Feeding the Child

The mothers we interviewed had little or no income from employment and were therefore unable to meet the financial demands they associated with good mothering. To cover the household expenses, they typically combined social benefits with occasional short-term paid work. This income was only enough for basic necessities, and some mothers repeatedly went into debt to cover housing costs. Many described experiencing food insecurity.

In such circumstances, the mothers invested significant effort in securing food for their families. Their accounts revealed that their efforts were child-centred, emotionally

absorbing, labour-intensive, time-consuming, and financially demanding – which are characteristics commonly associated with intensive motherhood (e.g., Hays, 1996; Ennis, 2014). Securing food required considerable creativity and resourcefulness, similar to the 'diaper work' described by Randles (2021) among poor mothers in the United States. The mothers combined various resources, both financial and in kind: social benefits, paid work, help from relatives or friends, and assistance from charitable organisations. They also used multiple strategies: restricting their own food intake, producing their own food, stretching supplies, seeking discounts, prioritising food over other expenses, and cutting back on all other living costs:

> *I have to be thinking about it constantly. We either sell things we don't need anymore, the stuff the kids grew out of. Or I defer the payments of the electricity bill, so I don't pay this month and I pay it the next, with a fee of 100 Czech Crowns. And I call it a 'loan'. I know it's wrong, but where can a mother save some money? So, if we are short of money for food, I do it. And then I know that I'll have to work more hours, I have to find some extra cleaning job, to repay it. What else do I do… I donate plasma for money. I would never do this before, I know it is bad for my body, but now I have to, because these 700 Czech Crowns are exactly our electricity bill* (Barbora).

Despite material scarcity and food insecurity, their narratives emphasised the food quality and 'proper' nutrition.

> *Food just got more expensive (...) If we wanted vegetables, we got a cucumber for 30 Czech Crowns. My son's growing up, so he's eating a lot* (Sonia).

> *There's a lot of saving on Mum (...) I put everything into the child and especially into the food. We put most into food* (Jana).

The emphasis on 'quality food' reflects the influence of the intensive motherhood ideology. Kinser (2016) similarly found that the feeding discourses in the United States moralise maternal feeding work and promote maternal blame. Gillies et al. (2016) also showed that scientific advice on nutrition to develop children's brains is used to stigmatise poorer parents, who often lack the resources to follow such guidance, resulting in their children being seen as biologically 'inferior'. Our interviewees largely internalised these moral discourses and expert advice on the importance of healthy food for children's development, by stressing the need for good quality nutrition even when food was scarce. Alena, for example, tearfully described that she "really had an empty fridge (…) cupboard (...) everything was empty (...) it was terrible", but still emphasised the need for healthy food elsewhere in the interview:

> I think the lifestyle is important somehow a little bit, healthy food and not just some. Even *the chemical-boxed milk, you can tell right away. And then the kids behave differently, they concentrate differently, they do differently at school. (...) I'm not an advocate of cheap food. I don't want any chemical food. You can see it in the kids right away (...) They get sick right away, they don't feel well, so I prefer less, but normal food* (Alena).

To meet the norms of 'proper' nutrition, mothers often neglected their own needs to provide the 'right food' for their children's development. In the Czech context, this usually meant at least one freshly cooked meal a day. School cafeterias in Czechia generally help mothers meet this standard, and many respondents participated in programmes providing free school meals. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when some interviews were conducted, school cafeterias were closed for several months:

> *I took it out of the money that I would normally have for living, so I just put that into food so that he had a hot meal every day and just a more varied diet than I would have allowed for myself* (Edita).

> *She's not struggling, I wouldn't forgive myself, I've even given up cigarettes because of that* (Blanka).

While child nutrition is a general aspect of parenting, the low-income single mothers we interviewed did not only settle for 'good enough' or filling food but took full responsibility for securing healthy nutrition to support their children's development, despite severe financial constraints. They engaged in inventive strategies that they described as self-sacrificing as well as time-, labour-, and emotion-intensive. Rather than questioning popular beliefs about healthy nutrition, they accepted and internalised them. In explaining their mothering practices, they revealed the motherhood norms they followed and their efforts to meet them, consistent with the ideology of intensive motherhood.

Child Development: Providing a Safe and Stimulating Environment

Another area where the influence of intensive motherhood ideology was evident in our participants' narratives was their approach to children's extracurricular activities. Consistent with the norms of intensive motherhood, which emphasise the importance of organised, expert-led activities for children's development, our participants placed great importance on their children attending such activities. Despite financial constraints, they prioritised these opportunities over their own interests and did everything possible to enable their children's participation.

They demonstrated similar inventiveness as in securing food: making use of free school clubs (often choosing schools based on the availability of interesting leisure activities), seeking donations from foundations, and offering volunteer work in exchange for reduced or waived fees. They looked for affordable options and devised creative strategies to allow their children to participate at little or no cost. For example, Stela volunteered as a chaperone at her three children's alternative private Waldorf school after her divorce, while Alena worked as a cook at a children's camp with English classes to enable her daughter to attend:

> *I was an assistant cook at a camp and I had a cheap camp for my daughter. It was an English camp in the mountains, and it was very nice. For 10 days. I worked there, I didn't get any pay, and my daughter was there with me* (Alena).

However, extracurricular activities had a somewhat different meaning for these mothers compared to how they are described in the literature on intensive mothering. The primary benefit they saw in clubs was that children spent their free time safely – away from gangs or spending too much time on their mobile phones, and engaging in healthy activities.

But especially in that team, the discipline, the training in general, just to have that as well. And he needs to be outside, because he's very active, so to get out and learn something new (Edita).

Well, the ballet, she's sleeping better when she attends the ballet classes. When she has that physical activity, she's just in such a happy, good mood (Alena).

They generally did not view clubs primarily as a means to develop the child's talents, knowledge, or skills, mentioning this only secondarily. Organised activities were mainly valued as safe environments where the child could spend time on purposeful activities before the mother returned home (see also Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

I still think that it's better to be at training three times a week and just play a football match on the weekend than to just, I don't know, be here at 12:13 with a gang because that's what I see with the socially disadvantaged (Romana).

It was common for low-income, ethnic majority mothers (like Romana) to refer to the Roma minority (often termed 'the socially disadvantaged') and try to separate their children from them, aiming to 'protect' them from the influence of 'the wrong crowd' through their choice of schools and extracurricular activities. School segregation between ethnic majority and Roma children persists in Czechia (see also Jarkovská et al., 2020).

These mothers' views of clubs did not fully align with the intensive motherhood notion that such activities are essential for developing children's individual talents, knowledge, and skills. They saw clubs as a means of ensuring their children's happiness and safety, rather than as preparation for future success. This reflects Halldén's (1991) distinction between viewing the child as a 'project' – a long-term investment – and as a 'being' – valuing the child's current experiences for their own sake. While the 'child as project' view aligns with intensive mothering, the 'child as being' perspective emphasises the present well-being. Nonetheless, the desire to protect children from negative influences was also future-oriented and linked to school choice, aiming to prevent children from adopting habits which some mothers associated with socially excluded Roma families. This suggests that low-income single mothers combined both perspectives in their approach to motherhood.

A few mothers explicitly sought intergenerational upward mobility through elements of intensive motherhood. Jana tried to enrol her son in a class for gifted children at a selective school and sacrificed her own needs to provide him with educational toys and prestigious extracurricular activities. Jana's self-sacrificial attitude reflects the dominant

norm of mothers being responsible for their children's future success, thus intensifying the moral and emotional burdens associated with mothering:

> *But I bought him a lot of toys, I didn't even eat, so I could afford to buy him more. So he has different toys here, creative ones or this, so he doesn't lack anything (...) On Thursdays, my son has computers, that's out of school (...) a friend of ours arranged that for us, it's a very expensive club* (Jana).

All participants emphasised the importance of organised activities – a core element of intensive mothering. For most, these activities represented a safe and stimulating environment for their children. Only a few, like Jana, explicitly linked them to future academic and labour market performance or upward socioeconomic mobility. However, in the absence of resources, all mothers developed a range of inventive strategies to ensure that their children could access such activities and environments.

Child-Centredness: Time for and with the Child

A key norm of intensive motherhood adopted by the mothers interviewed was an absolute focus on the child in their early years. Most participants, regardless of education, preferred to stay at home with their children for the first three years. This preference aligns with the Czech family policy, which provides parental benefits for up to three years for caregivers, rather than investing in childcare services – less than eight percent of children under three in Czechia have access to formal childcare (OECD Family Database, 2025). Their decisions were further shaped by their status as single mothers and intersecting disadvantages in the labour market, such as low education, limited skills, living in deprived or remote areas with a lack of employment opportunities, and, in one case, facing discrimination due to Roma ethnicity.

However, this focus on the child was not only a response to practical constraints like the lack of childcare services. The mothers drew on narratives associated with intensive motherhood to explain their choices, expressing beliefs that children need their mother's full-time attention for as long as possible, that it is necessary to put their children's needs first, that a mother is a natural and irreplaceable caregiver, and that caring for children is central to their identity. These beliefs were reinforced by their solo caregiving, which they felt fostered a closer relationship with their child than mothers with partners:

> *We're tied to each other a lot, because we've kind of been on our own since the beginning. I'm just there for him, I do everything for him* (Jana).

Some mothers sought to balance being present with earning an income by working as nannies or assistants in kindergartens or schools, allowing them to stay close to their children and supervise their environment (e.g., Marie, Valerie). Others, like Laura or Eva, worked night shifts so as to spend time with their children during the day.

When mothers felt they had not met these norms – such as entrusting their children to others too soon or prioritising paid work over time with their children – they expressed regret and guilt:

> *Yeah, so I had to choose at that time either the children, their education, their time, or simply a roof over their heads and food. And at that time I had to pay for the flat. It's a fact that I neglected my son terribly, terribly* (Karla).

The tension between time with children and financial necessity was reflected in their moral justifications:

> *The childcare is one thing, it's priceless (...) We live modestly and that's what I can give the children. (...) It's not the holidays at the seaside; it's the time we spend together* (Kája).

> *But my priorities are elsewhere. I'm glad that the kid's like, I can handle the time, that I can devote the time to him. Boy was born in 2015, I started the employment in 2019, October, and 'til that time I just haven't bought a jacket, a pair of pants, proper like new ones. (...) My priorities are different* (Anna).

> *I think when you have a child you shouldn't even think about your big professional development* (Laura).

These statements illustrate rhetorical strategies that help maintain a positive self-image even when mothers feel they do not fully meet prevailing motherhood ideals. They emphasised their own modesty and self-sacrifice, prioritising their children's needs and, at the same time, modelling modesty as a value for their children, that is, instilling in them the 'right' values. In doing so, they challenged pressures to consume and to invest as much as possible financially in their children, by valuing time together over expensive clubs and material goods.

Mothers highlighted the importance of the time spent with their child and their own responsibility and irreplaceability in child-rearing, reflecting middle-class norms and the ideals of intensive mothering. They did not view sharing caregiving with others or the community as legitimate, nor did they see responsibility for the child's upbringing as shared.

This is particularly clear in 'deviant cases' which show that motherhood can be practised differently. For example, Blanka left her daughter in her own mother's care to take a well-paid job, enabling her to repay debts and secure stable housing. During this period, she only visited her daughter but did not feel guilty, despite knowingly transgressing the norms of 'proper motherhood', since she was creating better conditions for her child's future. Once she could enrol her in preschool, she resumed care and took a lower-paid job with a flexible schedule. This case demonstrates that the courage to reject middle-class norms of intensive, time-consuming maternal care in early childhood can, in the long term, be internalised as a positive and child-oriented strategy.

Emotional Labour: Protecting the Child from Adversity

The participants living in persistent economic hardship had to manage intense negative emotions, such as fear for the future:

> *That you really worry every month if there's going to be food at all, if you're going to pay everything and so on. So, it's definitely challenging* (Romana).

Interacting with welfare authorities also required resilience in the face of stress and was a source of anxiety, especially when a lack of resources threatened their ability to demonstrate that they were providing adequate care, and even more so when seeking help due to insufficient resources. The participants described consciously suppressing these negative emotions, especially in front of their children:

> *I think I have already set it up in my head so that the child doesn't feel that things are going wrong* (Blanka).

This reflects a specific and intense form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003), encouraged by popular psychological discourses which warn mothers that their own insecurity and stress can harm their child's psychological well-being and development.

This labour is intensified by the 'child as project' perspective typical of intensive motherhood ideology, where a mother's success is measured by her child's development, and is even greater for single mothers who bear the entire emotional, temporal, financial, and physical burden alone.

The participants noted that their children were deeply emotionally connected to them and highly sensitive to their moods and emotions, a sensitivity they attributed to being raised solely by their mothers. These mothers, even when facing material hardship, did not focus solely on survival and feeding their children; they also sought to be 'good mothers' by shielding their children from the negative effects of poverty and their own stress, aiming to protect their children's mental health. Their inventiveness and creativity extended beyond securing food and a safe, stimulating environment to being attentive to their children's specific needs, even when this required managing their own emotions and investing additional energy and time in mothering.

When they felt they had not fully met the prevailing motherhood norms, they re-framed their circumstances in positive terms: lack of money taught their children to be economical and modest; unemployment allowed more intensive time with their children; demanding work or the absence of another parent fostered independence. Employed single mothers, for example, highlighted their children's earlier and greater independence as a positive outcome of their situation, compared to that of other children in the neighbourhood:

> *We don't actually see each other in the morning. They've got everything ready, I'll get it all ready for them in the evening, but they go to school on their own, they have breakfast on their own in the morning, they have everything ready, but I'm not there anymore* (Aneta).

Throughout their narratives, mothers emphasised that their children were well off and happy, reconstructing a positive maternal identity and countering the stigma of poverty. They applied the same creativity and inventiveness to maintaining a positive self-image as they did to providing for their children's nutritional and other needs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although our interview scenarios did not include explicit questions about intensive motherhood norms, these norms emerged strongly in the narratives of low-income single mothers. This indicates that the demands associated with intensive motherhood ideology permeate the beliefs and practices of these mothers, though in specific forms and not in all cases.

Variation in Intensive Motherhood Norms

While participants were clearly aware of expectations to devote maximum attention, time, emotion, and resources to their children; to prioritise their children's interests over their own; and to stimulate children's development through organised activities, their understanding of these norms differed from those described in studies of middle-class parents (Ennis, 2014; Hays, 1996).

First, they interpreted child-centredness as total material and emotional self-sacrifice. Prioritising children's needs meant securing basic necessities and shielding children from hunger and the negative effects of poverty, often at the expense of their own needs. This involved a lot of time, energy, and emotional commitment. This finding supports previous research showing that poor mothers must exert more effort to fulfil motherhood demands than their middle-class counterparts (Elliott et al., 2015; Verduzco-Baker, 2017).

Second, participants stressed the importance of spending time with their children in everyday settings, rather than focusing on costly developmental and status-building activities, clubs and hobbies. Time together was constructed as morally superior to financial investment in children's development and skills. Although the belief that significant financial investment is necessary for successful child development was present, it was often questioned and contested.

Third, while they valued organised extracurricular activities for children's development, the primary motivation was to provide a safe and stimulating environment, free from danger and bad influences, rather than to secure future educational or labour market success.

Their mothering practices reflected the influence of intensive motherhood ideology but were also shaped by their socioeconomic circumstances. While they strongly supported the idea of child-centredness and the prioritisation of children's needs and interests over their own, they adapted some norms – such as the importance of organised activities – to their specific situations and explicitly questioned others, like the need for substantial financial investment in children's upbringing.

Recognition, Inventiveness, and Agency

Our analysis highlights that, in striving to meet dominant motherhood norms, low-income single mothers engage in numerous additional activities on a daily basis that are highly emotion-, labour-, and time-intensive – yet these efforts are rarely recognised as part of intensive motherhood in studies focused on white middle-class women. These activities include securing adequate nutrition, providing a safe environment, and protecting children from the negative impacts of poverty and poverty-driven maternal stress. The reason for not being considered in the studies on middle-class mothers is that middle-class mothers do not face these challenges, or they are less intensive for them.

Low-income single mothers also develop inventive strategies to meet the intensive motherhood norms, as shown in the case of organised activities (see also Randles, 2021). For example, they participated as volunteers, asked for support from charities, or actively sought affordable, quality activities, which made their mothering even more time-intensive and emotionally demanding.

The prevailing view that low-income single mothers lack the financial and time resources to meet intensive motherhood norms is inadequate because it ignores their agency and creativity in meeting the demands of motherhood and fulfilling their children's needs.

Successfully managing motherhood with limited resources was a source of pride and positive maternal identity for these women, who valued their inventiveness, their ability to shield their children from financial anxiety, and the resulting independence, modesty, and close relationships they fostered with their children as mothering successes.

Negative Effects

However, the strategies low-income single mothers use to meet intensive motherhood demands in adverse conditions may also contribute to their marginalisation in the long run. Operating within self-perpetuating systems of inequality and oppression, their mothering becomes even more self-sacrificing, potentially exacerbating their insecurity and low social status into the next generation.

Choosing to forego paid work with the objective to spend time with children can result in persistently low earnings, while accepting insecure, low-paid, and low-skilled jobs to provide basic necessities like food can trap them in cycles of precarious employment (see also Hašková and Dudová, 2017). In addition, concealing financial difficulties and food insecurity, while emphasising independence and self-sufficiency, may prevent them from receiving adequate support. While they aimed to instil values of modesty and discipline in their children, other traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness – often rewarded in market societies – may be less developed, potentially cementing their children's social status and limiting future opportunities (see Lareau, 2011).

In line with the prevailing motherhood ideology, interviewees adopted self-responsibilisation with respect to the material and emotional well-being of their offspring and

expressed guilt when they felt they had failed in this responsibility. This self-responsibilisation is in line with the dominant values of individualism, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and meritocracy (Amable, 2011). In attempting to fulfil intensive motherhood norms, they undermined their position in the productive work system, deepening their economic hardship. Additionally, self-sacrificial mothering strategies often led to a worsening of their own physical and mental health.

Ultimately, although low-income single mothers actively strive to meet dominant motherhood norms – often through considerable personal sacrifice and inventive strategies – their efforts frequently go unrecognised and may inadvertently reinforce existing social inequalities. These experiences highlight the need for a greater recognition of diverse maternal practices and call for a critical re-evaluation of prevailing motherhood norms from an intersectional perspective.

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