

Unmasking the Care Fetish: Institutionalisation, Internalisation, and the Punitive Dimensions of Motherhood from the Social Reproduction Perspective

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This special issue grew out of the interdisciplinary conversations started at the conference “*Thinking Through Motherhood: Images, Experiences and Narratives Across Time*”, held at Vilnius University in January 2024. Organised by the *MotherNet* project – an EU-funded research network – the conference focused on how motherhood is defined, represented and experienced across history and into the future. The panels created a trace coined ‘a temporality of motherhood’ that took account of the fluctuating and also pluralistic nature of mothering experiences, in contrast to more rigid definitions that tend to essentialise motherhood and posit it as homogenous, static and innate. The scope of the conference was interdisciplinary, inviting colleagues from all disciplines to consider how their work interconnects with narratives of and about motherhood and how these narratives inform the practical and policy dimensions of personal and social issues.

As editors of this special issue of STEPP – a journal concerned with the mechanisms through which social problems are constructed and addressed at both individual and policy levels – we were particularly drawn to examine how the participants of this conference engage with motherhood as a site of profound systemic tension. Inspired by the work of scholars who see gendered (but also classed and racialised) care labour as

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embedded in the profit-making logic of social reproduction, we were interested in both the political and the subjective realities that can be observed when analysing the tension that arises when the fundamental labour of reproductive and daily care and social continuity meets the demands of culturally situated national ideologizations, institutional policy and economic productivity. Therefore, this issue set out to explore both historical and contemporary formulations and experiences of motherhood as a matrix of gendered, classed, and racialised reproductive work and its socio-temporal and geotemporal, political, and cultural assemblages.

To address these systemic tensions, we invited the authors to think through the foundational frameworks offered by scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2017), Patricia Hill Collins (1994), and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) for their seminal work on the contradictions of social reproduction, the intersectional agency of motherwork, and the institutional stratification of reproductive labour.

However, while the theoretical foundation of this special issue remains grounded in viewing maternal practice as a form of gendered and classed work, the recent intervention by the feminist scholar Sara R. Farris (2025) provides a crucial expansion of this lens. In her critique of the common conflation of social reproduction feminism and the ethics of care, she argues that the latter often treats care as an idealized type of caring that implies fundamentally “positive affect” (2025, p. 3). Drawing an analogy to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, Farris maintains that, in the sphere of care, a ‘reversed’ fetishisation occurs: whereas commodity fetishism hides the human labour behind the object, care fetishism makes the caring subject – i.e., the mother – the one who is highly visible, while the economic structures and material constraints that underpin her labour are systematically elided. Thus, following Farris, by framing maternal devotion as a de-contextualised and idealised moral or emotional bond, this fetish effectively functions as an “object of desire” that “hides relations of oppression and exploitation” (2025, p. 3).

Building upon Farris’s intervention, we are led to ask: what is the analytical capacity of ‘care fetishism’ when deployed as a diagnostic tool within the interdisciplinary field of critical motherhood studies? If we accept Farris’s premise that the ‘ideal type’ of care functions as a fetish, we can begin to uncover the invisible structures within motherhood ideologies and social policy that depend upon this idealisation. Furthermore, this concept might also serve as a useful tool for conceptualisations of maternal subjectivity and its embeddedness in culturally and institutionally situated assemblages.

In this special issue, we gather contributions from philosophy, history, sociology, social work, business studies and educational sciences. We see these contributions as successfully demonstrating how the fetishisation of maternal care is both institutionalised and internalised at the macro, meso and micro levels of social relations, ranging from the physical cost of ‘biowork’ to the discursive construction of maternal identity. Hence, in what follows, we offer a meta-analysis of the findings of the articles presented to this special issue and argue that the concept of “care fetishism” (Farris, 2025, p. 3) serves as a constructive theoretical framework for the interdisciplinary field of critical motherhood studies.

One of the striking contributions in this special issue regarding the physical and material cost of maintaining the fetishised image of the self-sacrificing mother is the study by Hana Hašková and Radka Dudová. Drawing on 50 semi-structured qualitative interviews, they explore how the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) is reflected in the experiences of low-income single mothers in Czechia. By focusing on this group, the study highlights the diffusion of the intensive motherhood ideology and the intersectional aspects of social reproduction. Sara Farris argues that social reproduction feminism is able to deconstruct the fetishisation of care as an “idyllic and unencumbered interdependence between loving subjects [by showing that] the experience of care and interdependence can differ so much between people, since it is largely contingent – among other things – on their social position” (2025, p. 17). Similarly, Hašková and Dudová demonstrate that motherhood is shaped by intersecting identities, where middle-class, white, heterosexual mothers may face societal pressure to practise intensive mothering, while mothers from marginalised groups encounter additional challenges, such as economic instability, systemic racism, and discrimination that influence their ability to engage with intensive motherhood ideals. The study also outlines several ‘inventive adaptations’ that low-income single mothers employ with the objective to stabilise and maintain a “positive maternal identity” (Hašková & Dudová, 2026, p. 9), which could be understood as an internalisation of the ‘care fetish’ through an embodied self-responsibilisation of maternal citizens.

Importantly, the study also aptly demonstrates how the fetishisation of maternal care functions through embracing the child-centred and self-sacrificing model of intensive motherhood and its effects on the maternal body: Hašková and Dudová report that labour-intensive and time-consuming strategies are often employed by single low-income mothers when experiencing food scarcity, which often leads to limiting their own food intake. In some cases, it goes as far as donating blood plasma (Hašková & Dudová, 2026, p. 21). Following Farris’s framework, the fetish of care is embedded in the responsabilisation of single low-income mothers, which uncovers how both the neoliberal cultural and institutional idealisation of maternal care and self-sacrifice hide the underlying systemic inequalities and the state’s failure to resource the fundamental work of social reproduction collectively.

The material outcomes of the neoliberal responsabilisation of maternal citizens that ‘care fetish’ is so effective in hiding are well described in Elisa Baiocco’s (2026) article on care networks of surrogacy. In her philosophical text, she engages with the question of paid surrogacy as a form of reproductive labour – or ‘biowork’ – and its relationality to global care chains, asserting that surrogacy is a profoundly relational practice that belongs to global networks of care where reproduction is stratified along hierarchies of class, race, and geography. Importantly, she explains that because society views care as a “gift to the beloved ones”, the introduction of money into gestation creates a profound social stigma (2026, p. 115). To resist this stigma and maintain dignity, surrogates adopt “altruistic narratives” (2026, p. 111) to frame their reproductive labour as a moral sacrifice.

This narrative, however, obscures the reality of “stratified reproduction” (Colen, 1996), where procreative tasks are distributed following the global hierarchies of the race, class, and migration status, enabling the Western neoliberal script of work-life balance at the expense of the women from the Global South (Baiocco, 2026, p. 115). Read through the lens of Sara Farris, this ‘gift logic’ functions as a discursive mechanism of ‘care fetishism’ (Farris, 2025) where the ‘altruism’ of a surrogate elides the globalised market structures and relations of exploitation that underpin her bodily labour. Importantly, similarly to the findings of Hašková and Dudová, surrogacy can be seen as yet another form of “inventive adaptations” (2025, p. 9) that are employed by women to meet the requirements of cultural and political scripts, such as neoliberal responsabilisation, that employ ‘care fetish’ as a way to stigmatise marginalised individuals subjected to frameworks of stratified reproduction.

If the ‘care fetish’ forces marginalised mothers into ‘inventive adaptations’ and extreme self-sacrifice to meet the standards of the good mother (Hašková & Dudová, 2026), it simultaneously creates pressure for professional women. Marian Crowley-Henry explores how these mother-workers employ their own ‘adaptive strategies’ through the concept of “subjective career crafting” (2026, p. 45). She problematises the working mother’s role by highlighting how contemporary neoliberal Western societies have produced conflicting socio-cultural ‘advice’ for working women and mothers, while ignoring patriarchal structural barriers and simultaneously blaming women for failing to take ownership of their role and status as mother-workers (Crowley-Henry, 2026, p. 45). In her conceptual paper, Crowley-Henry utilises the metaphor of the Greek goddess Metis and argues that mother-workers remain resilient and imperishable despite the challenges imposed on them by the male patriarchy, and ultimately endure in pursuing their combined mother-worker roles through subjective career crafting (2026, p. 48). Importantly, Crowley-Henry explicitly integrates an intersectional lens into her framework by acknowledging that mother-workers are not a homogenous group and that the ‘Metis effect’ that she proposes is ‘deeply situated’ within power dynamics that render some women “more vulnerable and less privileged than others” (2026, p. 55).

Interestingly, this ‘care fetish’, which hides structural pressures by making them look like an agentic ‘career crafting’, works similarly for mothers in the German labour market. Working mothers are the focus of Irina Hertel’s article, where she analyses how German mothers reason about going back to work after having children. Drawing on 17 narrative interviews, she describes how mothers’ employment decisions are shaped by a combination of personal aspirations, structural constraints, and socio-economic factors such as the educational level and economic conditions. Hertel finds that while mothers with higher education and previous full-time experience tend to pursue part-time work as a ‘temporary compromise’, mothers with limited qualifications or precarious legal and economic conditions see work less as a matter of choice and more as a necessity driven by external pressures. Consequently, this study could be read as an example of how the paradigm of ‘choice’ is used to enhance the ‘care fetish’: in this context, the German tax system (specifically, spousal income-splitting (Hertel, 2026, p. 94)) institutionalises the

care fetish by offering “false incentives” (Hertel, 2026, p. 96), which renders a mother’s reduced labour participation a seemingly rational, affective choice within the household despite long-term economic risks, such as “slower career progression, lower pension contributions, and a heightened risk of poverty in later life” (Hertel, 2026, p. 94). By framing these arrangements as mere personal preferences or a culturally accepted ‘cliché’, the care fetish systematically elides the structures of economic disincentives and inadequate childcare infrastructure that partly influence women’s decisions. This process fetishises the paradigm of choice and transforms care into a disciplinary tool that celebrates maternal domesticity of the privileged while rendering the structural exploitation and precariousness of marginalised mothers invisible.

Strong cultural ideals around motherhood persist in Germany even after children have moved out, and the intensive care work has already been done. The study of Marie-Kristin Doeblér captures the process of fetishising domestic motherhood through a set of discourses that extend even into later stages of life. The focus of her study is maternal identity after intensive daily care is no longer a part of women’s daily lives. In her qualitative sociological work, Doeblér compares two distinct sets of data to contrast cultural scripts with lived experiences – she looks at a sample of 28 self-help books published in Germany (1987–2022) that offer guidance to parents on the ‘empty nest’ phase. She then reads those findings against the biographical narratives of six middle-class mothers in Germany whose children have recently left home.

Doeblér’s findings suggest that German self-help books homogenise being a mother and naturalise what a mother is, does, and feels. The discourse, the way it is presented in these books, naturalises maternal grief and suffering as the only culturally accepted response to children leaving. Following Farris, this could be understood as a discursive dimension of ‘care fetishism’, where maternal devotion is measured through a moralising affective discourse, where the maternal suffering or ‘void’ is used as a normative marker of being a ‘good’ mother: “[s]everal passages imply that if a mother does not feel as if ‘a part of [one] self has been taken away’ (XXV, 56), she may not have loved her children (enough) or has not taken the mother’s role seriously” (Doeblér, 2026, p. 65). Ultimately, this fetishisation of maternal grief functions as a disciplinary tool that pressures women to remain anchored in maternal roles. However, Doeblér finds that rather than reporting a permanent ‘void’ or ‘Mother Blues’, the mothers in Doeblér’s study narrate a dynamic balancing of motherhood with other sources of identity, such as paid work and social engagement.

Importantly, Doeblér’s research serves as an explorative case study (2026, p. 61) of a homogeneous group of well-educated, middle-class mothers who possess the cultural and economic capital to interpret the post-parental phase through self-realisation and identity work (2026, p. 72). It thus confirms what the majority of the contributions to this special issue have observed – namely, that the ‘care fetish’ encapsulates a normative ideal type of care exclusively privileging white, middle-class perspectives (Duffy in Farris, 2025, p. 9), while posing real material consequences for marginalised mothers both as caring subjects and individuals in need of care.

A good example of how the normative nature of ‘care fetish’ can be historised is offered by Judy Bolger in her study of unmarried mothers living in a workhouse in Ireland in the early 20th century. Judy Bolger (2026, p. 76) provides a striking historical analysis of the representation and treatment of mothers, particularly unmarried mothers, within the Irish workhouse system at the turn of the twentieth century. Her study deconstructs the official state discourse generated by the 1906-dated Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform to reveal how the state viewed impoverished motherhood through a moral lens that categorised women based on sexual behaviour and ‘respectability’ (2026, p. 77). Through an analysis of 1000 pages of testimony and data from 159 workhouses, she identifies a punitive morality scheme where unmarried mothers were disproportionately scrutinised as sources of “moral contagion” (Bolger, 2026, p. 78). Consequently, the state advocated for the institutionalised separation of the mother and child, by recommending “special institutions” for first-time “girl-mothers”, and final separation for “depraved” cases involving multiple children (2026, p. 81).

Therefore, Bolger demonstrates that, in the context of the year 1906 in Ireland, destitution was not treated as a structural economic failure – but it was instead filtered through a “moral lens” (p. 76) that equated poverty with a lack of “respectable” character (p. 86). Thus, while Farris offers an understanding of ‘care fetish’ as a process in which the visibility of the caring individuals (i.e., mothers) obscured all the structural inequalities behind their reproductive work and its situated materiality, Bolger demonstrates that fetishisation of maternal respectability functions as a moral filter that “hides relations of oppression and exploitation” (Farris, 2025, p. 3) and, eventually, defines their right to care for their children as well as to be taken care of (as citizens in need of relief).

Importantly, as Bolger observes, “the recommendation to remove children from poor ‘unmarried mothers’ and ‘ill-conducted’ married mothers reflected a new era in child-welfare provisions [where] the state legitimise its role as *de facto* parent for children whose own parents did not meet the standards set out by the middle-to-upper classes” (2026, p. 87). Interestingly, this historical example of state surveillance based on class-defined moral standards finds a striking contemporary resonance in Jolanta Malažinskienė’s (2026) analysis of how child welfare systems continue to regulate, pathologise, and blame mothers who experience violence from their intimate partner. Through a critical theoretical analysis of scientific literature, her study employs feminist, human rights, and matricentric perspectives to deconstruct how mothers are represented and regulated by social systems (2026, p. 30–31).

Malažinskienė identifies a pervasive “deficit model of mothering”, where mothers – despite being victims of violence themselves – are held solely responsible for their children’s well-being and are labelled ‘unfit’ or ‘irresponsible’ if they fail to shield their children from witnessing abuse (2026, p. 33). This leads to a systemic paradigm of ‘father invisibility’ regarding violent behaviour, contrasted with an intense ‘mother visibility’ that over-scrutinises and pathologises the mother’s actions while eliding structural constraints such as trauma and economic dependence (2026, p. 36). Ultimately, she advocates for a matricentric approach (O’Reilly, 2019) that shifts the focus from maternal

correction to prioritising the autonomy and human rights of the mother as an individual (Malažinskienė, 2026, p. 39). Mirroring the historical patterns discussed by Judy Bolger, this inquiry demonstrates the extent to which the institutionalisation of the idealised standards of care has on marginalised mothers. Following Farris's paradigm of 'care fetish', a mother's exposure to violence wielded by the intimate partner is frequently overshadowed by her perceived failure to fulfil a normative script of nurturance and protection. Just as the Irish state once pathologised the 'unmarried mother' to justify child removal, modern child welfare systems utilise a "deficit model of mothering" that transforms structural victimisation into a personal moral failing, rendering the father's violence invisible while over-scrutinising the mother's ability to 'protect' her children (2026, p. 31).

As it has been demonstrated throughout this special issue, several contributions to this special issue reveal the punitive dimension of what Farris has described as the "care fetish". As in the case of low-income single mothers in Czechia and their sacrificial intensive motherhood practices or the policing of "unrespectable" Irish mothers, this punitive dimension manifests through a commitment to fulfil the normative script of reproductive work to the standards of a middle-class defined "nurturance". However, a study of Lina Gabrijolavičienė and Eglė Šumskienė demonstrates the physical dimension of the punitive dimension of the "care fetish" and its discriminatory patterns that marginalise socially vulnerable women. By using quantitative data from a 2023 nationwide survey of 1,471 women, the study analyses childbirth as a socially and institutionally structured process (2026, p. 127). The results show that vulnerable mothers report higher rates of negative birth experience (21 per cent vs 13 per cent) and subsequent postpartum depression or PTSD (2026, p. 126). Driven by the reported lack of respect, communication, and informed consent, these findings reveal that social vulnerability functions as a "significant risk condition for both negative childbirth experiences and adverse mental health outcomes" (2026, p. 125).

As our interpretative meta-reading of the findings of the articles in this special issue demonstrates, the concept of "care fetishism" (Farris, 2025, p. 3) can be used as a constructive theoretical framework for the interdisciplinary field of critical motherhood studies. Inspired by Sara Farris, our social reproduction feminist readings have outlined how the normative script of "proper care" – or, to use Duffy's (in Farris, 2025, 9) formulation, a middle-class understanding of "nurturance" – functions as a major disciplining paradigm embedded in cultural, social, and institutional assemblages.

The papers in this special issue reveal a wide range of the "care fetish" in action: from denying parental care rights to marginalised "immoral" unmarried mothers (Bolger, 2026), to institutionalising "domestic maternity" through legislative frameworks presented through a narrative of "choice" (Hertel, 2026), to enabling the invisibility of global chains of reproductive "biowork" (Baiocco, 2026), and exposing poor single mothers to poverty through the discourse of "intensive motherhood" (Hašková & Dudová, 2026). Ultimately, care fetishism serves to reinforce a hierarchy of respectability, where support and care are granted or withheld based on a mother's ability to perform a

narrow, idealised version of nurturance despite the hidden inequalities and exploitation that are invisible due to the capitalist and cultural focus on the caring work of the mother.

Author Contributions

Ieva Bisigirskaitė: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

Maja Bodin: Conceptualization, Project administration, Supervision, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

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