Myths of 'good motherhood' and the wellbeing of mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic

Stephanie Batram-Zantvoort

S Batram-Zantvoort[1], L Wandschneider[1], O Razum[1], C Miani[1]
[1]Department of Epidemiology and International Public Health, School of Public Health, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany
Contact: stephanie.zantvoort@uni-bielefeld.de

Background:
Measures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic had major impacts on families, e.g., due to the unpredictable closing of childcare facilities and schools. Parents had to re-arrange their work, childcare and household obligations.
Methods:
We conducted 17 email interviews with mothers having at least one child aged $<=6$ years. Topics included adjustments to the pandemic situation, views on motherhood and wellbeing. We analysed data through content analysis.
Results:
We found differing consequences on the wellbeing of the interviewees. One group articulated a deceleration of daily life and increased satisfaction due to doing more justice to their role as mother. Another group felt highly stressed and overloaded. Some expressed having shaky hands and heart palpitations, others felt mentally exhausted. The idea of not being a 'good mother' was expressed by many, provoking guilt and self-doubt. Most interviewees referred to ideological myths of motherhood, picturing mothers as caring and sacrificial, yet well-organized managers of the family. Norms imposed on 'working mothers' require their full effort and an ability to manage employers' demands. These conflicting norms reveal tensions between the roles mothers find themselves in, potentially leading to adverse (mental) health outcomes.
Conclusions:
Our analysis shows that myths of 'good motherhood' act as a perpetuation mechanism of traditional gender roles and increase the social burden many mothers are expected to carry, adding to the challenges the global pandemic brought on families. Negative consequences on (mental) health require mitigation strategies, putting mothers at the centre of Covid-19 response policies.
Key messages:
- The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates traditional gender roles and the multiple social burdens that mothers are expected to carry.

- Conflicting norms imposed on mothers reveal tensions between the different roles they find themselves in, potentially leading to adverse (mental) health outcomes.