ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

"The workload is staggering": Changing working conditions of stay-at-home mothers under COVID-19 lockdowns

Awish Aslam 🔘 | Tracey L. Adams 🔘

Department of Sociology, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence
Awish Aslam, Department of Sociology, Western University, London, ON, N6A 5C2, Canada.
Email: aaslam5@uwo.ca

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the home as a work environment, but the focus has centered on the experiences of paid workers. Stay-at-home mothers (SAHMs), for whom the home was already a workplace, have received little attention. This article explores how pandemic-induced lockdowns impacted SAHMs' working conditions and their experiences of childrearing. Combining a Marxist-feminist conceptualization of domestic labor with a labor process framework, we performed a qualitative content analysis of vignettes SAHMs shared about their day-to-day domestic labor in an online mothering community. Our findings show that, under lockdown conditions, the primacy given to partners' paid work combined with children's increased demands for care and attention reduced SAHMs work autonomy and exacerbated gender inequalities in the home. Combining labor process theory with literature on motherwork illuminates the home as a gendered work environment and enhances understanding of how changing conditions of domestic labor can intensify gender inequalities (and workers' awareness of them) that typically remain "hidden in the household."

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, domestic labor, intensive mothering, labor process, stay-at-home mothers

1 | INTRODUCTION

A rising body of research documents the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers in Western countries, including the US (Bahn et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2021), Canada (Qian & Fuller, 2020), the UK (Chung et al., 2021), and Australia (Craig & Churchill, 2021; Ruppanner et al., 2021). Findings from these studies show that layoffs, exposure to the virus, and the challenge of combining working from home, childcare, home-schooling, and domestic labor have disproportionately affected women (Bahn et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Qian & Fuller, 2020; Ruppanner et al., 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on mothers who work outside the home is significant, with implications that are not yet entirely clear (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020). The challenges experienced by working parents under lockdowns, forced to work from home and endure intense work–family conflict, has also been documented (Chung et al., 2021; Collins et al., 2021; Craig & Churchill, 2021).

Largely forgotten in this flurry of research are the experiences of stay-at-home mothers (SAHMs): those who devote themselves to raising children and maintaining a household. Since the home was always their workplace, one might assume that nothing much changed for them, except, perhaps, allocating more time to assisting school-aged children learning from home. Research on care work during the pandemic has tended to focus on parents balancing paid and unpaid work or those paid to care (Bahn et al., 2020; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). The experiences of SAHMs, who do this work daily, without pay, has received little attention.

In this article, we set out to address this gap through a qualitative content analysis of SAHMs' accounts of motherwork[1] during the pandemic. Combining a Marxist–feminist conceptualization of women's domestic labor with a labor process analysis, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have wreaked havoc on SAHMs' working conditions and constrained their relationships with other members of the household, contributing to a decline in their personal well-being. With partners and children spending more time at home, SAHMs experienced less autonomy in their work, as they were confronted with intensified demands, frequent disruptions, and increased scrutiny over their work performance. Although they sought to achieve pre-pandemic standards of intensive mothering, even under these impossible conditions, partners' devaluation of their work and skills resulted in rising tensions within the household and exacerbated mothers' stress levels. Changes in their work environments illuminated gender inequalities often concealed under their usual routines, and mothers, in response, protested these inequalities through informal acts of resistance to preserve their sanity and maintain some semblance of control over their work.

By taking a closer look at the essential but largely invisible labor of SAHMs, our findings contribute to the burgeoning literature on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our use of a Marxist–feminist conceptualization of domestic labor and our efforts to bridge scholarship on neoliberalism and motherwork add to the growing awareness of mothering, among other domestic activities, as a form of skilled labor, rather than an all-encompassing identity or an extension of women's natural abilities. Moreover, by drawing on labor process theory and applying it to motherwork, we highlight the importance of autonomy, skill, and resistance in shaping the material conditions of SAHMs' work and their relationships with other members of the household, thereby enriching understanding of mothers' childrearing activities and the home as a gendered work environment.

1.1 | Conceptualizing mothering as domestic labor in Western neoliberal capitalist societies

Among the different responsibilities domestic labor entails, mothering (i.e., childbearing and childrearing), in particular, is constructed and analyzed predominantly as an all-encompassing identity or "state of being" (DiQuinzio, 1999). Formulating mothering as *being* rather than *doing* at once mandates an impossible requirement for the omnipresence of mothers to satisfy the needs of their child(ren), while obfuscating the labor mothering demands (DiQuinzio, 1999;

Edgley, 2021). Analyzing mothering as a form of work expands the focus beyond maternal identities to encompass the activities, practices, and conditions under which this labor is done.

Cultural portrayals of mothers often create a false dichotomy between "stay-at-home mothers" and "working mothers," oversimplifying the complex realities of mothers today (Dillaway & Paré, 2008). The phrase "stay-at-home mother" typically calls the image of a white middle-class woman to mind, and while many SAHMs may fit this demographic profile, it is common for mothers of all backgrounds to cycle between full-time employment, part-time employment, and staying at home (Dillaway & Paré, 2008). Although motherwork is itself complex, SAHMs typically perform this labor in combination with other domestic activities (Latshaw & Hale, 2016).

In Meg Luxton's (1980) *More than a Labor of Love*, she conceptualizes women's unpaid domestic labor as four distinct but related processes: (1) Caring for household members; (2) childbearing and childrearing; (3) housework; and (4) transforming wages into goods and services for the household's use. She is careful to specify that these four components are interwoven, and disruptions or modifications to one process reverberate throughout the others. We draw on Luxton's framework for three reasons. First, it provides a comprehensive overview of the content and organization of this work. Second, her Marxist–feminist approach frames women's domestic labor as social reproduction that is integral to capitalist economies and the reproduction of gender inequality. Third, she emphasizes the importance of historical context in understanding the labor process and women's experiences of this work. Luxton, therefore, provides a balanced picture, drawing attention to the practical value of domestic labor, while simultaneously revealing how its organization and conditions both reflect and reproduce social inequalities within a given context.

Today, both mothers and fathers are spending less time on housework, but more time on childrearing activities (Bianchi et al., 2012). Mothers continue to shoulder more of this work than fathers, whereas fathers spend more time on leisure activities (Bianchi et al., 2012; Latshaw & Hale, 2016). Even when comparing stay-at-home mothers to stay-at-home fathers, mothers spend more time on domestic labor and less time on leisure (Latshaw & Hale, 2016).

Mothers' greater involvement and sense of responsibility for childrearing have been attributed to contemporary constructions of "good" mothering (Hays, 1996). In Western neoliberal capitalist societies (including but not limited to the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia), "good" mothering is framed through what Sharon Hays (1996) refers to as "intensive mothering" (Edgley, 2021; Newman & Henderson, 2014; O'Reilly, 2020). Intensive mothering imposes a complex and impossible set of expectations on mothers, requiring endless sacrifice and selflessness (e.g., 24/7 devotion of her physical, emotional, and mental self to "be there" for her children) and professional-level skills (e.g., therapist, pediatrician, consumer safety inspector, and teacher), so that motherwork becomes all-consuming (Hays, 1996).

Dominant ideologies of mothering shift in response to changing cultural and economic circumstances, and the normative meaning and practice of intensive mothering that emerged in the 1990s, was rewritten in accordance with the rise of neoliberal capitalism (O'Reilly, 2020). This period is marked by the simultaneous disinvestment in social welfare programming and the privatization and deregulation of various aspects of social reproduction (e.g., education, health, care work, and recreation), which externalized this work onto individual households (Güney-Frahm, 2020). Thus, capitalism's historic reliance on the deskilling and feminization of domestic labor, through the construction of "separate spheres" coupled with neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility, ultimately holds mothers accountable for performing this work on behalf of their children (O'Reilly, 2020). Because mothers have also become responsible for how their children fare under neoliberalism, it is unsurprising they are spending more time on childrearing (Edgley, 2021). In recent decades, expectations have expanded to emphasize mothers as "conscious consumers" who must invest in their children through consumption to produce the best neoliberal subjects (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020). An increased emphasis on "educative work" is part of these broader trends (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020). Failure to live up to the standards of intensive mothering, it is believed, could seriously damage children and their future prospects, and raises questions about a mother's moral character and femininity (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020; Hays, 1996).

Although the demands of child-centered mothering may not be attainable or desirable for all mothers, these are the normative standards against which they are measured, regardless of their preferences (Newman & Henderson, 2014).

Even in the face of these high expectations, the work of mothers continues to be viewed as unskilled, requiring effort, care, and femininity; acquired skills typically go unrecognized.

1.2 | The labor processes of Women's unpaid domestic work

For SAHMs, the workday never ends. There is no distinct separation between the workplace and the home, coworkers and family, and work time and leisure time (Luxton, 1980). SAHMs labor around the clock, and even when they are not performing domestic tasks, they are on call (Fox, 1980; Luxton, 1980; Oakley, 1974). Although it is traditionally concerned with the wage relationship, conceptual insights from labor process theory bring a critical approach to the organization of work (Braverman, 1975; Smith, 2015; Thompson, 2010). This framework draws attention to power inequalities and how they are reproduced through the organization of the labor process and how shifts at work over time impact autonomy (alternatively referred to as control) and skill, reproducing and exacerbating inequalities, and generating worker resistance (Braverman, 1975; Smith, 2015; Thompson, 2010). A labor process lens can, therefore, improve our understanding of pandemic-induced disruptions on working conditions and their broader implications. Applying thelabor process theory to the present case draws our attention to how changes in work due to COVID-19 may affect SAHMs' autonomy, skill, and resistance.

Autonomy is an important dimension of the labor process, because it has been associated with greater satisfaction and well-being among workers (Wheatley, 2017). As an informal and unpaid work process, whose primary work setting is the home, women's domestic labor is not regulated by official standards that are enforced by an employer, outside of the ubiquitous cultural-normative pressures of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996; Luxton & Corman, 2001). These conditions help explain its low status and social marginalization, but they also afford SAHMs a relatively high degree of autonomy over how tasks are designed, planned, scheduled, and executed (Luxton, 1980; Wheatley, 2017). But because domestic labor is tasked with reproducing labor power, the volume, intensity, and frequency of this work can expand and contract depending on the needs of the household and its members and broader social and economic circumstances (Luxton & Corman, 2001).

Like autonomy, skill has been central to debates about the labor process since its inception (Braverman, 1975; Smith, 2015). Historically, the question of skill has always been gendered, and "women's work" was almost immediately relegated as unskilled labor (Romero & Pérez, 2016). Feminist scholars have critiqued the designation of housework and care work as "unskilled," explaining that this designation relies on its (lack of) monetary value and the essentialization of these activities as natural traits of women, performed as a "labor of love" that knows no bounds (Romero & Pérez, 2016). And while early research on women's domestic labor emphasized the monotonous and largely physical aspects of domestic work (Oakley, 1974), more contemporary empirical research captures its emotional and cognitive demands and the expertise required to perform the routine tasks of care work, childbearing and childrearing, housework, and the transformation of wages into goods and services (Daminger, 2019; Luxton, 1980; Romero & Pérez, 2016).

Labor process debates have produced a rich body of scholarship on individual and collective strategies for worker resistance (Lucio & Stewart, 1997; Smith, 2015). Notably, Lucio and Stewart (1997) introduce the notion of the "collective worker" to connect worker resistance with working conditions. The collective worker explains workers become aware that their working conditions entail exploitation through informal collaboration with other workers, and together they engage in resistance. However, the social organization of SAHMs' domestic labor (i.e., that it is dispersed among private households and performed in relative isolation) poses a significant barrier to their collective ability to challenge the conditions of their work (Luxton & Corman, 2001).

1.3 | Unpaid domestic labor in times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic altered people's experiences of life and work globally. Although little attention has been paid to SAHMs, their lives have been equally upended. Some have posited that the pandemic may provide a moment where societal values can be re-imagined, and fathers may take on more responsibility for childrearing (Miller, 2020; Shafer et al., 2020). Among dual-earner families, some have found ways to establish more equitable divisions of work and family labor (Miller, 2020; Shafer et al., 2020); however, in single-earner families, there may be less impetus for change. There is certainly, thus far, no evidence that the pandemic has undermined intensive mothering or the organization of childrearing; rather, there are signs of persistence (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020). Under lockdowns, domestic labor, in all its dimensions, has been altered. For many, the household became a site of both unpaid domestic labor and paid work, potentially impacting how both were conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic may therefore have disrupted how SAHMs' work was organized and experienced. To understand the impact of these changes, in the context of gender inequalities, we sought to answer two research questions:

1) How did the pandemic and associated lockdowns affect SAHMs' working conditions and their experiences of childrearing?
2) How did these changes impact SAHMs relationships with other members of the household and their personal well-being?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Data collection/sample

Reddit is an online community of more than 52 million daily active users who share information through user-generated forums (Reddit Blog, 2020). It is the seventh most visited website in the world, but the majority of users are located in the US (49.32%), the UK (7.85%), Canada (7.76%), and Australia (4.34%) and communicate primarily in English (Statista, 2021). Reddit is further organized into smaller communities, called subreddits, dedicated to particular topics. This public platform allows users to generate and share content and comment on and/or "upvote" or "downvote" posts. While content shared on Reddit can be viewed publicly, only registered users, can share and react to content. The site also encourages users to navigate the platform through pseudonymous usernames.

Given our interest in the experiences of SAHMs, we identified a motherhood-related subreddit that encouraged an honest and supportive culture of motherwork. We collected the top 100 posts, from 90 unique usernames, that discussed experiences of SAHMs in relation to the pandemic, between mid-March 2020 and mid-October 2020.[2] All posts used pseudonyms and were publicly available.[3] Because we were conducting a qualitative content analysis, we limited our collection to posts that were a minimum of 100 words. Each post was saved in portable document format and imported into NVivo for analysis.

Ammari et al. (2019) found the anonymity granted by Reddit allowed parents to escape societal pressures and expectations of what it meant to be a "good" parent and increased disclosure and support for parents navigating potentially stigmatizing issues. Although motherhood is not inherently stigmatized, certain aspects of motherwork can be stigma-inducing, and mothers are often subject to judgment from family and other parents over childrearing decisions (Hays, 1996).

While the anonymous nature of Reddit allows for unique and perhaps more candid insight into SAHMs' daily lives, it also ensures that comprehensive and consistent information about the socio-demographic characteristics of users remain unknown. Only those who explicitly identified as SAHMs in their posts were included in our data set. We did not set out to restrict our sample to SAHMs in heterosexual partnerships; however, all but five SAHMs referred to husbands, fathers, or partners using male pronouns.[4] The remaining five did not make mention of a

partner. Although mothers typically included relevant context about their employment and partner status in their posts, it was less common for mothers to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity or that of their partners. Similarly, some SAHMs did share details about their residence (e.g., the city, region, state, province, territory, and/ or country they lived in), and others made social or cultural references (e.g., location-specific lockdown policies) that alluded to their geographical location. These indicators suggested the majority of posts were made by SAHMs living in the US, and to lesser extent, Canada, the UK, and Australia, mirroring the wider usership of this platform, but without explicit and consistent indicators, we are unable to draw conclusions on these bases. These details could have provided a fuller understanding of how mothers' experiences are shaped by their social location and the cultural contexts in which they mother.

2.2 | Analysis

Taking an inductive, interpretative approach, we began by reading each post to familiarize ourselves with SAHMs' experiences to develop provisional codes. These codes were primarily data-driven, formed through the accounts SAHMs provided about their experiences during the pandemic. After coding the first 50 posts, the researchers met to discuss their impressions and discrepancies. Because this form of analysis is iterative, we repeatedly moved through coding, analysis, and interpretation, and after several rounds, we grouped similar codes under broader themes. The themes captured how SAHMs' working conditions were altered because of the pandemic, how these changes grew their awareness of gender inequalities in the home and led to rising tensions among the household, their subsequent attempts to resist these inequalities, and the consequences of these changes on their well-being.

3 | FINDINGS

In their Reddit posts, SAHMs vented about the heightening challenges and pressures they faced under lockdown and the changing nature of their working conditions. Consistent with intensive mothering, SAHMs prioritized their children, but with young ones experiencing pandemic-related stressors and acting out, childrearing became more taxing and time consuming, which disrupted the usual rhythms of their work. With partners now claiming home spaces as workspaces, meeting expectations was harder than ever. As the demands of their work became overwhelming and conflicted with their partners' work and leisure activities, women reported considerable strain, and gender inequalities became a renewed source of frustration.

3.1 | Putting kids first despite changing conditions

During pandemic lockdowns, the home—the primary setting of SAHMs' work—needed to function as a school, playground, recreation setting, office, and restaurant, and people at home all day needed entertainment and attention. SAHMs were primarily responsible for performing the labor necessary to keep the household running and to co-ordinate these various activities under strained conditions.

In response to these abrupt changes, SAHMs organized their work to ensure they could "be there" for their children during this tumultuous time, but this required significant changes to their routines. SAHM18 discussed the challenges that stay-at-home orders imposed on her usual childrearing methods: "We seriously spent every day at the museum or the library or the park if we weren't shopping. He's not a craft kid, and he doesn't care about any coloring or fun I try to set up. All he does is look out the window and ask to go to his favorite places." Because these sites served important functions in their childrearing practices, SAHMs grew increasingly concerned about how disruptions to their access would affect their children's well-being.

To keep their newly housebound children engaged, SAHMs made child-centered adjustments to their work settings and routines. SAHM85, who was juggling the needs of her 5-year-old daughter and her newborn, explained,

> I've tried making things as fun as I can. We bought her a trampoline and pool at the beginning of quarantine. She has sandboxes, swing sets, slides, bikes/scooters, etc. We try to take her to secluded spots to scavenger hunt, have picnics, play games, and do crafts.

Despite SAHM85's efforts, she was heartbroken to hear her daughter felt "every day is the same, & she's so tired of it."

Similarly, SAHM32, who had four little ones at home, exhausted all of the recommendations for keeping her children occupied about three months in: "I've done all the puzzles, read all the books, done all the painting/sidewalk chalk, we learned how to ride bikes, and now roller skates. I've also done all the crafts, all the bread making, all the gardening, and all the other SAHM crap." As the pandemic wore on, SAHM32's children grew tired of these activities, to the point where "TV isn't even interesting to them anymore, it won't hold their attention." Instead, her children were "starved for individual attention."

Socially isolated under lockdown, kids' demands for mothers' time and attention reportedly increased, and SAHMs, guided by cultural ideals of intensive mothering, felt obligated to satisfy tv their children's social needs. The all-consuming nature of childrearing in a pandemic made it difficult for SAHMs to balance the immediate needs of their children with other aspects of their work. SAHM26 described a typical day with her four-year-old daughter about four months into the pandemic:

> My daughter basically lives up my ass. It will be 80+ degrees in the house but she still needs to be touching me, clinging, wiggling, flopping. I can't do anything without her right there with a million questions. I tried to clean her disaster of a room today. I gave her the Switch so she could play a game. She followed me in her room within 5 minutes.... I give up, go in the living room for a break, and she's done playing the game and follows me. Says she's bored. I get that kid, but you have a million toys, a tablet, tons of crayons and markers and coloring books. A nice backyard with a swingset and a sandbox. But nope. Gotta harass mom instead. [...] She talks just to talk. Regardless of who is listening or if someone else is talking. Just on and on and on. As I type this, she's got one leg over my lap and is just babbling at me.

Children's constant need for attention was exhausting SAHMs and inhibited their ability to get much else done. Child-centered adjustments demanded a tremendous amount of physical, mental, and emotional labor from SAHMs, in addition to their other duties; however, SAHMs were well-aware that there was little public recognition or interest in understanding how their work had been transformed by the pandemic. SAHM52, who was fed up with suggestions about "fun/productive things to do while you're quarantined," put it this way:

> The chances of me doing anything other than playing dinosaurs for hours on end and reading five thousand Thomas the Tank Engine books is... pretty minimal. Don't get me wrong, I love my kid's company. But for god's sake, everybody, please stop telling me to write a novel or learn needlepoint and start telling me how to survive the fiftieth consecutive episode of Peppa Pig.

SAHMs' posts linked children's increased demands for attention to social isolation and stress. SAHM81's comments capture these concerns:

> I'm a SAHM. I'm around my kids all the time. This isn't the same as that. We usually go places. We have playdates, girl scout meetings and gymnastics classes. [...] My kids need their friends too, not just me

and their father. And we are all scared and stressed out. [...] Everyone is off their routines. My kids randomly break down and cry over things they normally wouldn't. They pick up on my anxiety and stress. It's hard. We are all doing our best.

Mothers also reported children yelling, turning violent, and misbehaving because of pandemic-related stress. While mothers traditionally perform most of the emotion work to nurture children and provide them with a sense of security and comfort, the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic coupled with disruptions to their children's routines intensified the demands of this work. And as SAHM81 pointed out, emotion work became even more challenging as SAHMs struggled to cope with their own anxiety and stress about their current situation.

Contributing to SAHMs' growing dissatisfaction was a decline in their work *autonomy*. Apart from organizing their routines around the needs of their child(ren) and other family members, SAHMs' working conditions typically afforded them with a relatively high level of flexibility in how they scheduled and performed their work. However, SAHM88, who was looking after four school-aged children and a husband who was now working from home, captured how SAHMs' control over the labor process was significantly impaired under these new conditions:

> I'm a SAHM, so I had days all to myself, now I'm stuck forced to home-school. My husband is home too for the foreseeable future. All my time has disappeared into being on-call for everyone. At any given moment someone wants something from me. Kids call out "mom" every single second. [...] I'm drowning in requests of me. Kids constantly want food or snacks or entertainment or screens or atten-tion - they are all independent, why do I have to help!? Husband (who I love, but doesn't understand), expects meals and sex and attention and conversation and productivity. I know this isn't critical, but I'm exhausted of giving and never getting.

Although SAHMs are always "on call," children's increased proximity and reliance on SAHMs during the pandemic transformed their working conditions, as their young ones' perpetual disruptions demanded increased flexibility in when and how SAHMs performed their work. The accumulating workload, continuous disruptions, and the faster pace of work required to keep up with the household's needs fragmented the labor process and encroached on SAHMs' autonomy.

3.2 | Partners contribute to deteriorating working conditions

With few exceptions, partners rarely took on a greater share of childrearing or housework as a regular part of their routine, although some did occasionally provide SAHMs with respite. In an effort to achieve a greater balance, SAHM64 voiced her concerns to her husband, but his response only added insult to injury:

> He said "women get fulfillment by being mothers. Spending time with her should be rewarding in itself." And then he laughed, poked me, left the room with his computer, and said "You two have fun now! I've got work to do!" And shut the door. I have never once thought he would say something like that. I am still kinda shocked and sick to my stomach.

The devaluation of various aspects of domestic labor, especially childrearing, as "fun" and "fulfilling" but not work was a common response to SAHMs' requests for greater involvement. For SAHMs, this reaction suggested that partners had little understanding of the pressures they faced in their day-to-day work or any appreciation for their labor. The discounting of SAHMs' work and the skills required to perform it was also one of the key reasons SAHMs hesitated to negotiate the workload with their significant others.

When partners did try to help, they sometimes just made more work for SAHMs. SAHM17's, account of her husband's attempt at shopping for baby items was emblematic:

> Last night he came home with 10 jars of custard baby food… WTF the baby does not need 10 jars of custard. I asked for nothing with blueberry because baby breaks out… half the fruit pouches had blueberry in them… WTF. I asked for teethers.. he came home with a mittin for 3 month olds. Baby is 7 months old and is 12–18 month sleepers. Repeatedly I have asked for NO button clothing for baby, what does he bring home, clothing with buttons in size 6 months…. Among many other things. What is the point of him shopping if I have to go out and return half the items and buy the proper ones the next day?

The inadequacy of significant others' efforts meant SAHMs ended up having to do the same job again and effectively discouraged them from making future requests for more involvement.

SAHMs also discussed how partners exercised control over their work by assuming a managerial role, which included providing unsolicited feedback now that they were spending more time at home. SAHM89, who was responsible for all of the domestic labor involved in raising two stepchildren and two babies, discussed the denigrating comments she received as she struggled to adjust to her new workload:

> Apparently he "does his job and pays for everything" and i can't even keep the house clean so i'm the one bad at my job. maybe because i need some damn help?!!! like i'm caring for 4 kids all by myself. even when i try to dedicate time just to cleaning guess what? he won't entertain the kids. "just strap the baby on! have the older ones help!" […] as soon as he's off the clock he's on his ass on the couch and gaming and doesn't get up for anything. then criticizes everything i do from the couch.

Such criticisms often failed to consider how SAHMs' working conditions had deteriorated under the pandemic. Moreover, despite their dissatisfaction with SAHMs' work performance, these same significant others rarely made meaningful contributions to domestic labor more generally. These judgments explicitly devalued the work SAHMs performed, and the skills required to do it, and they also contributed to the teeming guilt that SAHMs were "not doing enough" or "failing" as mothers.

SAHMs' work was also implicitly discounted by partners, most notably by those who were working from home, when they disregarded the practices and routines SAHMs had in place to keep the household running smoothly. SAHM20 summarized the reaction of many others toward this new work arrangement: "He's In. My. Space. He's disrupting my routine. And the kids' routine. And I'm annoyed. And irritated." Of particular concern were disruptions to children's routines. Because childrearing was central to SAHMs' work, preserving some consistency in children's sleeping, eating, learning, exercise, and play was essential to ensure their well-being as well as SAHMs' overall management of the household. While SAHMs attempted to prevent their households from "descending into chaos," partners frequently undermined these efforts. SAHM30 explained,

> We had routine. We had respect. But now he's also working from home. And he stayed up until 5 a.m. playing video games. And thinks that the kids having a free for all is fine because we have no specific schedule or needing to be anywhere anytime. I'm losing my mind.

Even when they were actually working from home, significant others showed little regard for SAHMs' work. Although some families were able to create a home office in a separate room of the house where paid work could be done with relatively few interruptions, others had no choice but to combine paid and unpaid work in shared spaces, such as the kitchen or living room. Under these circumstances, SAHMs were expected to rearrange their work around the needs of partners' paid work, and in some cases, the expectations were simply unreasonable. SAHM63's husband,

for example, requested she keep the children quiet while he was on work calls. She reflected on the impossibility of this request:

> Keep them quiet?? They're three and zero years old. He's understanding about that, but he still wants me to "try" to achieve the miracle of silence. Like I'm Jesus or something. Like I could have had peace and quiet all this time but chose utter shrill, whiny chaos per my own personal preference.

Although partners' expectations varied, few gave much consideration to how their working from home would impede SAHMs' working conditions, as evinced through the impractical arrangement SAHM44's husband insisted on:

> I stayed in the bedroom until his work day ended and then did any kitchen or laundry stuff after he went to bed. […] With an openish floor plan I can't beat and bang around in the kitchen while he works in the living room; as his job is having to be on the phone with customers.

Eventually, this setup took a toll on her well-being, and for the sake of SAHM44's mental health, she spoke to her husband about making alternative accommodations. After little deliberation, however, her husband simply dismissed her concerns: "He informed me that it was working out fine for him and I need to let it go." The extra work significant others imposed on SAHMs' already mounting workload made matters worse rather than better and contributed to their contradictory views on their role as SAHMs: "I simultaneously feel like I do everything for everyone and that I do fuck all every day." (SAHM47).

Gender inequality and the primacy given to paid work resulted in the devaluation and deskilling of mothers' unpaid domestic labor. And as partners demanded accommodations that made completing motherwork nearly impossible, SAHMs' stress and anxiety exacerbated.

3.3 | The contradictions and impacts of intensive mothering

Even in the context of an ongoing global pandemic, SAHMs continued to hold themselves accountable to the standards of intensive mothering. But unlike most mainstream online spaces where users share flawless performances of motherwork, these SAHMs spoke about the challenges they faced keeping up with such expectations. They conveyed general concerns, like children's eating habits, as well as more specific frustrations pertaining to "pandemic parenting," like how to keep children entertained without relying on too much screen time. Although these SAHMs implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) acknowledged that the standards of intensive mothering were unattainable, especially during the pandemic, this was usually done through confessions of their "inadequacy" and the overbearing "mom guilt" stemming from this sense of defeat. SAHM59, who had two children under the age of five, captured this sentiment:

> I love my kids so much and try to do everything I can, but I'm always falling short and I feel like I'm failing them. I feel like because we don't go outside every day, or bake/cook something fun together, or do anything exciting, that I'm not giving them everything that they deserve and we're just existing.

Many SAHMs expressed orientations similar to SAHM59, but a handful of SAHMs were more resistant to the obligations of "intensive mothering," which they viewed as impractical under lockdown constraints. SAHM08, who was struggling to keep her 2-year-old occupied, justified allowing more screen time than usual by framing her current circumstances as a matter of survival:

> I'm so sick of reading posts about people who "aren't doing screen time" during the quarantine and who "don't do tablets." Can we just be real and honest for a moment? This quarantine is about survival.

> Meaning my surviving these next few weeks being stuck inside the house (can't go outside because of
> pollen) with a 2 year old. Screen time is the only tantrum free time we have. Cute Pinterest activities
> last all but 3 seconds and she's on to the next thing. Every fun game ends in tears. My house is freaking
> destroyed. Every toy is pulled out and I spend the next hour trying to play the clean up game that ends
> with mom picking up all the mess.

Despite taking this position, SAHM08 questioned whether she stood alone and asked others for advice about how to keep her toddler busy: "Am I the only one that says screw it to screen time limits and keeping a perfect home through this? If you're one of those no screen moms, I commend you and please tell me, what the heck do you do all day?" These comments suggested that although SAHM08 believed it was unreasonable to uphold the ideals of intensive mothering during the pandemic, she still felt pressured to conform.

The guilt associated with being a "bad" mother compelled SAHMs to prioritize the needs of their families at the expense of their own well-being. Without access to their usual social outlets, family members turned to SAHMs to fill the roles of their teachers, co-workers, friends, and playmates, and these obligations came to consume SAHMs' time and exhaust them both mentally and emotionally. As SAHM92 put it, "I'm either in mom mode or wife mode."

Under SAHM12's usual routine, for example, she had 1 hour of "blessed peace and quiet," during which her toddler napped. This allowed her to complete a few quick chores and enjoy some recuperative "me time." Now that her husband was working from home, however, the "sacredness of nap time" in her work routine was disrupted by her husband's need for social interaction: "I'm trying to be extra patient with everyone because I know it's such a tough time, but I just really need some time where I don't have to be emotionally 'on'. He gets this sad little look when I have to tell him I'm busy, I wish he would just take the hint." Because these SAHMs usually worked in relative isolation for most of the day, the emotion work required to be "on" for their families 24/7 eventually became suffocating. SAHM81 summarized, "I love my kids. I love my husband. I look forward to spending time with them every single day and I get excited for our family time together. That doesn't mean I want to be stuck inside with them for months with no space to myself and no known end point." The need to be "on" coupled with the boundary-less workday edged SAHMs toward burnout. As SAHM86 described, "Some days, when I have spent every minute since the crack of dawn feeding, supervising, rocking, dressing, having conversations about cars, potty-ing...I just feel down. I haven't been able to sit down for a meal from start to finish in as long as i can remember."

SAHM58, who was looking after three children, one "manchild," as well as three cats and a dog, explained how her family's increasing reliance on her cognitive labor for the most basic tasks wore her down over time: "The mental workload is staggering and I'm collapsing under the weight. I'm wiped from reminding people to take care of their own damn bodies, for pete's sake!" SAHM58 began every morning with the same struggle to get her husband out of bed and to work on time, "Yes, he's just going upstairs to his office to work, but still. GO TO WORK, DAMMIT!" She outlined, at length, how each of her children presented their own unique challenges and required constant attention and supervision. After a long day of looking after everyone else, SAHM58 turned to crafting to decompress, but this routine was disrupted once her children decided that their bedtime was only a "mild suggestion":

> last 3 nights, they were up, harassing me until 11-fucking-30 about Legos. Yes, Legos. So my last
> bastion of headspace time, the late night crafting session after they're asleep, is gone. Poof! Then
> they're surprised the next day when they're crabby, exhausted messes and I'm a raving bitch who
> can't cope.

In the context of these heavy demands, SAHMs struggled to make time for themselves. Some reported trying to engage in "self-care" by negotiating "little escapes" throughout the day. SAHM86, for example, resorted to cleaning or other monotonous chores to avoid being "on" for her family: "Cleaning feels like a nice break, because I can put on a podcast and zone out." Likewise, SAHM09 ate her breakfast in the bathroom to try and get some quiet from

her 2-year-old and 2-month-old daughters. A few SAHMs drew on more creative strategies. SAHM29, for instance, described how she carved out some space for herself, away from her husband and two sons:

> One of my saving graces lately has been having our (small and unimpressive) master bath to myself. I love taking my sweet ass time to wash my face or floss or touch up my dyed hair in this bathroom. Sometimes I just go in there to browse reddit or even to have an uninterrupted snack. [...] So, against every trained grain in my body to obsessively clean, I've taken to leaving the master bath just as it is - my own beautifully created disaster. It doesn't bother me because now that I'm the only person using it, I feel like I can tolerate the filth. Sometimes I clean it but leave the clutter, and even add more unnecessary clutter just to ensure my private space stays private. Am I the only who has come to this? I don't want to keep this up forever, but I just might need to.

Balancing the additional cognitive labor and emotional needs of their families with their own personal well-being became so difficult that even 10 minutes of silence and privacy was considered a form of "self-care." Although these moments did provide SAHMs with some relief, it was apparent that their standards for "me time" had been lowered. SAHM86, who described her orientation to cleaning as "a waste of time" before the pandemic, now looked forward to it; she stated, "To me that's honestly kind of depressing."

4 | DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic cast a spotlight on the often undervalued yet essential nature of (un)paid reproductive labor. This focus on the "care burden" points to the critical value of this work and the women who are disproportionately responsible for it. However, there is a surprising silence about how this crisis has affected women who devote themselves to this labor 24/7. We set out to address this gap through a qualitative content analysis of SAHMs' posts in a mothering subreddit, where they shared accounts of domestic labor during the pandemic. Combining a Marxist–feminist conceptualization of women's domestic labor with a labor process analysis of their working conditions (namely, autonomy, skill, and resistance), we contribute to the growing body of research on the gendered impacts of the pandemic by addressing the following research questions: (1) How did pandemic-induced disruptions and associated lockdowns affect SAHMs' working conditions and their experiences of childrearing? (2) How did these changes impact their relationships with other members of the household and their personal well-being?

Our findings show how SAHMs' autonomy and control over the labor process significantly deteriorated under lockdown. The closing of schools and childcare facilities compelled SAHMs to prioritize child-centered activities in their work routines, but this disrupted the usual rhythms of their work. Although partners—particularly those who had transitioned to remote work—were now spending more time at home, their more frequent presence only further impinged on SAHMs' autonomy and control over the labor process. Because SAHMs were used to their work going unnoticed, significant others' discounting of their skills and their negative assessments of mothers' work performance resulted in rising tensions within the household. This also reinforced feelings of inadequacy and "mom guilt" among SAHMs, at a time when mothering ideals seemed further out of reach and yet more essential than ever.

SAHMs resented familial and societal expectations of their infinitely elastic capacity to perform this labor. Despite being stretched to their limits, however, cultural pressures of intensive mothering, underpinned by the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, drove SAHMs to strive for these impossible standards—though this came at a considerable cost to their own well-being. The unending obligations, loss of control over the labor process, denigration and deskilling of their work, and the relentless sense of defeat propelled SAHMs into a perpetual state of burnout.

Nevertheless, while women grappled with the demands of intensive mothering during a global pandemic, and often engaged in discussions of parental "educative work," they did not passively submit themselves to these ideological forces. This subreddit connected SAHMs with an online community that allowed them to observe patterns of

gender inequality across mothers' experiences, invoking the "collective worker," which showed them they were not alone, and encouraged them to resist contemporary constructions of "good" mothering.

The findings from this study resonate with previous research on the contradiction between the necessity of women's unpaid domestic labor in reproducing the current system of neoliberal capitalism that is characteristic of Western societies like the US, Canada, the UK, and Australia, and the simultaneous social and economic devaluation of this work (Bahn et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Luxton & Corman, 2001; O'Reilly, 2020). Even in light of the ongoing pandemic, the perception of motherwork as an unskilled "labor of love" and neoliberal discourses that define women as "worthy citizens" only if they meet the same standard as men (i.e., participate in productive labor through the paid workforce) have persevered (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020).

The lack of public attention directed at the worsening working conditions of SAHMs is emblematic of the centrality of the social organization of this work to the obfuscation and persistence of women's exploitation and oppression within (and outside of) the home. When partners work outside the home, it may be easier to maintain a fiction of equality between paid and unpaid work. However, with significant others spending more time at home, SAHMs were confronted with the subjugation of their domestic labor on a daily basis, and hence had a renewed sense of inequity, which made balancing work demands all the more challenging. Evidently, considerable work remains to address gendered inequalities in private spaces and to valorize the indispensable nature of SAHMs' work. Because the systematic reproduction of neoliberal capitalism relies on women's unpaid domestic labor, the ensuing inequalities cannot be resolved at the level of the household. Instead, future strategies must prioritize the socialization of care work and overcoming the false dualism of the public and private.

Before concluding this article, it is important to note some limitations. Although pseudonymous accounts of motherwork may allow us to capture hidden details of SAHMs experiences and circumvent social desirability bias that may be present when engaging with in-person methods, especially because of the moral imperatives surrounding motherwork, comprehensive and consistent details about SAHMs' social location could have provided additional insights. Motherwork is shaped by class and financial resources, family structure, geographic location, ethnicity, culture, and other factors. Because the pandemic's effects on SAHMs' work has not yet received much attention, future studies should explore other dimensions of their experiences, taking socio-demographic characteristics into consideration. Of particular interest may be the experiences of SAHMs who actively reject the ideals of intensive mothering practices. Post-pandemic studies should also investigate the long-term effects of the pandemic on SAHMs' well-being and their perceptions of gender inequality within the contexts of their own relationships.

At a time when workers in care industries are lauded as heroes for their critical life-(re)producing work, the domestic labor SAHMs expend to maintain the household and its members remain undervalued and invisible. With both men and women working from home, some have been optimistic that the COVID-19 pandemic could be a "great equalizer," and promote more equity in the division of domestic labor. This analysis suggests, instead, that the pandemic wreaked havoc on the working conditions of SAHMs, disrupting their autonomy, magnifying the devaluation of their skills and labor, and subjecting them to greater degree of domination that is endemic to neoliberal capitalism. By examining SAHMs childrearing activities through a Marxist–feminist conceptualization of domestic labor, and by highlighting the importance of autonomy, skill, and resistance in the labor process, our findings expose the home as a gendered work environment and contribute to unmasking neoliberal capitalism's reliance on the exploitation and oppression of women's unpaid yet essential work that remains "hidden in the household" (Fox, 1980).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We report no conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on Reddit at reddit.com. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: Reddit and reddit.com.

ORCID

Awish Aslam 🔟 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2633-4506

Tracey L. Adams 🔟 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6649-5988

ENDNOTES

[1] We use the term motherwork, introduced by Patricia Hill Collins (1994), to breakdown the liberal dichotomy of the public and private sphere.

[2] While the posts were attributed to 90 unique usernames, the use of pseudonymous usernames makes it difficult to determine precisely how many unique users shared posts, as the same user may have multiple Reddit accounts.

[3] Although the content on Reddit is publicly available, we anonymized usernames in our findings to enhance confidentiality.

[4] The use of male pronouns does not preclude the possibility that some SAHMs' partners could identify as nonbinary.

REFERENCES

Ammari, Tawfiq, Sarita Schoenebeck, and Daniel Romero. 2019. "Self-declared Throwaway Accounts on Reddit: How Platform Affordances and Shared Norms Enable Parenting Disclosure and Support." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 3(CSCW): 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1145/3359237.

Auðardóttir, Auður Magndís, and Annadís G. Rúdólfsdóttir. 2020. "Chaos Ruined the Children's Sleep, Diet and Behaviour: Gendered Discourses on Family Life in Pandemic Times." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(S1): 168–182. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12519.

Bahn, Kate, Jennifer Cohen, and Yana Meulen Rodgers. 2020. "A Feminist Perspective on COVID-19 and the Value of Care Work Globally." *Gender, Work and Organization* 27(5): 695–699. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12459.

Bianchi, Suzanne M., Liana C. Sayer, Melissa A. Milkie, and John P. Robinson. 2012. "Housework: Who Did, Does or Will Do it, and How Much Does it Matter?" *Social Forces* 91(1): 55–63. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sos120.

Braverman, Harry. 1975. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Monthly Review Press.

Chung, Heejung, Holly Birkett, Sarah Forbes, and Hyojin Seo. 2021. "Covid-19, Flexible Working, and Implications for Gender Equality in the United Kingdom." *Gender & Society* 35(2): 218–232. https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211001304.

Collins, Caitlyn, Liana Christin. Landivar, Leah Ruppanner, and William J. Scarborough. 2021. "COVID-19 and the Gender Gap in Work Hours." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(S1): 101–112. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12506.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1994. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." In *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, edited by Evelyn Nakano. Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda R. Forcey, 45–65. Routledge.

Craig, Lyn, and Brendan Churchill. 2021. "Dual-earner Parent Couples' Work and Care during COVID-19." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(S1): 66–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12497.

Daminger, Allison. 2019. "The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor." *American Sociological Review* 84(4): 609–633. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007.

Dillaway, Heather, and Elizabeth Paré. 2008. "Locating Mothers: How Cultural Debates about Stay-At-Home versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home." *Journal of Family Issues* 29(4): 437–464. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x07310309.

DiQuinzio, Patrice. 1999. *The Impossibility of Motherhood*. Routledge.

Edgley, Alison. 2021. "Maternal Presenteeism: Theorizing the Importance for Working Mothers of "Being There" for Their Children beyond Infancy." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(3): 1023–1039. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12619.

Fox, Bonnie. 1980. *Hidden in the Household*. The Women's Press.

Güney-Frahm, Irem. 2020. "Neoliberal Motherhood during the Pandemic: Some Reflections." *Gender, Work and Organization* 27(5): 847–856. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12485.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Yale University Press.

Latshaw, Beth A., and Stephanie I. Hale. 2016. "The Domestic Handoff": Stay-At-Home Fathers' Time-Use in Female Breadwinner Families." *Journal of Family Studies* 22(2): 97–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2015.1034157.

Lucio, Miguel Martinez, and Paul Stewart. 1997. "The Paradox of Contemporary Labour Process: The Rediscovery of Labour and the Disappearance of Collectivism." *Capital & Class* 21(2): 49–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/030981689706200104.

Luxton, Meg. 1980. *More than a Labour of Love*. Women's Educational Press.

Luxton, Meg, and June Shirley Corman. 2001. *Getting by in Hard Times: Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job.* University of Toronto Press.

Miller, Karyn E. 2020. "The Ethics of Care and Academic Motherhood amid COVID-19." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(S1): 260–265. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12547.

Newman, Harmony D., and Angela C. Henderson. 2014. "The Modern Mystique: Institutional Mediation of Hegemonic Motherhood." *Sociological Inquiry* 84(3): 472–491. https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12037.

Oakley, Ann. 1974. *The Sociology of Housework.* Pantheon Books.

O'Reilly, Andrea. 2020. "Maternal Theory: Patriarchal Motherhood and Empowered Mothering." In *The Routledge Companion to Motherhood,* edited by L.O. Hallstein, A. O'Reilly and M.V. Giles. 1st ed., 19–35. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Qian, Yue, and Sylvia Fuller. 2020. "COVID-19 and the Gender Employment Gap Among Parents of Young Children." *Canadian Public Policy* 46(S2): S89–S101. https://doi.org/10.3138/cpp.2020-077.

Reddit Blog. 2020. *Reddit's 2020 Year in Review:* https://redditblog.com/2020/12/08/reddits-2020-year-in-review/.

Romero, Mary, and Nancy Pérez. 2016. "Conceptualizing the Foundation of Inequalities in Care Work." *American Behavioral Scientist* 60(2): 172–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215607572.

Ruppanner, Leah, Xiao Tan, Andrea Carson, and Shaun Ratcliff. 2021. "Emotional and Financial Health during COVID-19: The Role of Housework, Employment and Childcare in Australia and the United States." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28(5): 1937–1955. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12727.

Shafer, Kevin, Casey Scheibling, and Melissa A. Milkie. 2020. "The Division of Domestic Labor before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada: Stagnation versus Shifts in Fathers' Contributions. *The Canadian Review of Sociology* 57(4): 523–549. https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12315.

Smith, Chris. 2015. "Continuity and Change in Labor Process Analysis Forty Years after Labor and Monopoly Capital." *Labor Studies Journal* 40(3): 222–242. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449x15607154.

Statista. 2021: Regional distribution of desktop traffic to Reddit.com as of December 2020, by country. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/325144/reddit-global-active-user-distribution/.

Thomason, Bobbi, and Inmaculada Macias-Alonso. 2020. "COVID-19 and Raising the Value of Care." *Gender, Work and Organization* 27(5): 705–708.

Thompson, Paul. 2010. "The Capitalist Labour Process: Concepts and Connections." *Capital & Class* 34(1): 7–14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816809353475.

Wheatley, Daniel. 2017. "Autonomy in Paid Work and Employee Subjective Well-Being." *Work and Occupations* 44(3): 296–328. https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888417697232.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Awish Aslam is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. Her research interests include work, migration, and social citizenship. In her SSHRC-funded dissertation, she examines the work experiences of second-generation immigrant Muslim women in Canada. Email: aaslam5@uwo.ca

Tracey L. Adams is a Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Western Ontario, Canada. Her research focuses on inequalities at work, professional work, and professional regulation. Recent books include the award-winning, Regulating Professions (University of Toronto Press, 2018) and the co-edited Gender, Age and Inequality in the Professions (with Marta Choroszewicz, Routledge, 2019). Email: tladams@uwo.ca