Being a mom and undoing gender? The ambivalence within the continuum of mothering experiences

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ABSTRACT

Specialized literature on mothering, ranging from intensive to more extensive models, has often examined how motherhood shapes women’s autonomy. This paper contributes to this debate by empirically investigating how one’s social class explains the configuration and understanding of gender roles following the transition to motherhood. It provides a framework to study the constant renegotiations and resignations that women undergo with child-rearing, both on a symbolic and a material level. Applying thematic analysis to 20 in-depth interviews with mothers living in dual-income heterosexual couples in Spain, we analyze how class trajectories, types of caregiving responsibilities, and migration processes intersect with mothering roles. Using a time-use approach, the study highlights how everyday maternal strategies are dynamically constructed within unequal social and economic contexts. Our findings challenge dominant dichotomous discourses by capturing a continuum of mothering experiences, which includes intensive, ambivalent, and extensive groups. This continuum is related to social class trajectories and, in all degrees, reveals persistent pressures to conform to gendered norms of motherhood, which remains the institutionalization of the feminine gender role, despite being lived in diverse and class-mediated ways.

KEYWORDS: intensive mothering, extensive parenting, gender, social class, time use.

INTRODUCTION

The patriarchal conflation of womanhood with motherhood has functioned traditionally as a cornerstone of gendered oppression, naturalizing women's confinement to caregiving roles under both capitalist and traditional family structures (Christopher 2012; Solé and Parella 2004). This reductionist paradigm, embedded in Western gender constructs, frames female identity through an essentialist lens that equates selfhood with reproductive capacity while erasing alternative modes of being. The contemporary manifestation of this idea demands complete physical, emotional, and temporal investment in child-rearing, transforming motherhood into an institution that devalues women's autonomous subjecthood. Concepts such as intensive mothering (Hays 1996), attachment parenting (Domínguez-Folgueras 2025; Lee et al. 2014), extensive mothering (Christopher 2012; Faircloth 2023), or momrade (Lewis 2023) attempt to capture these evolving manifestations.

Critical feminist scholarship has attempted to conceptualize motherhood as a relational practice shaped by social, cultural, economic, and political contexts (Dow 2016; Moore 1999). Yet, these approaches still struggle to explain understandings of contemporary mothering and account for the maximum variety of experiences. Mothers do not constitute a homogenic social group, and the different discourses and everyday lives concerning motherhood are shaped by axes of inequality, including class and migration status (Minnotte 2023).

Most research on motherhood has looked at the factors that enable professional women to balance all spheres of their daily life or at the persistent gendered disparities in the distribution of domestic labor and care (Abril et al. 2024; Bogino and Jurado-Guerrero 2025; O'Brien et al. 2025; Solé and Parella 2004). Scholars agree on one main idea: the arrival of children and childcare responsibilities intensifies structural inequities, which can be further impacted by periods of labor inactivity (Domínguez-Folgueras 2022; Poveda 2006) or by transnational motherhood and migration trajectories (Kačkutė 2025; León 2014; Uribe 2021).

This study takes a time-use approach to add empirical evidence to debates surrounding the autonomy or oppression that motherhood generates for women. From a doing gender framework (West and Zimmerman 1987), we analyze mothering experiences according to the class trajectories of women living in dual-income heterosexual couples in Spain. By focusing on social class trajectories as a key factor that shapes inequality (Seid 2022), this research identifies how structural and biographic factors explain distinct strategies of adaptation to motherhood and changing family roles. Spain's familistic welfare context is a valuable case study to analyze parenting experiences and expectations and illustrate possible change or persistence of gendered caring roles. This allows us to capture a broad spectrum of mothering experiences, resulting in a continuum, recognizing that motherhood is not merely a private or biological function but is deeply embedded within socioeconomic and political structures (Garcia-Lorenzo et al. 2024; Dow 2016).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This paper engages with sociological literature on intensive and extensive mothering, attachment parenting, gendered time use, and, overall, traditional family arrangements. Recent work has expanded to question mothering and time use within other household structures beyond

heteronormative ones. Still, we focus on dual-income heterosexual couples, given our interest in gender relations and inequalities after motherhood.

Intensive mothering and attachment parenting

Time dedicated to childcare in Western contexts has increased for both genders in recent decades (Bianchi et al. 2006; Fernandez-Lozano 2019; Shirani et al. 2012). However, men's participation in childcare remains uneven, concentrating on interactive and enjoyable activities (playing, educational tasks), while women continue to handle more routine tasks such as changing diapers or getting children ready for school (Borràs et al. 2021; Sullivan 2013). Recent research in Spain has also revealed an increase in the involvement of both genders in childcare responsibilities. This shift is more abrupt among highly educated professional couples, which contributes to making parenting a more time and energy-intensive endeavor (Borràs et al. 2021). Several studies suggest that factors such as changing fertility patterns, higher educational attainment among parents, and increased paternal participation in domestic work are all linked to this shift (Sullivan et al. 2014).

However, greater involvement does not necessarily translate into greater equality, as increased paternal involvement in childcare has not corresponded with a reduction in maternal involvement, and mothers seem to dedicate less time to housework but more to childcare (Bianchi 2011; Borràs et al. 2021). Scholars such as Abril et al. (2024) and Domínguez-Folgueras (2025) study this trend during the transition to parenthood and examine the conditions that generate an equitable division of domestic labor. However, as Sánchez-Mira (2022) notes, the relationship between increasing parental involvement and gender equality remains insufficiently theorized.

These trends are closely linked to the cultural rise of intensive mothering (IM), particularly among middle-class families, which began in the 1990s and expanded across various national contexts. As defined by Hays (1996), IM is structured around three central beliefs: mothers are innately more capable caregivers; good motherhood requires centering one's life around the child; and children are emotionally rewarding and deserving of significant parental investment. Building on this framework, Sánchez-Mira and Muntanyola-Saura (2020) argue that these values have contributed to the development of attachment parenting (AP) in Spain, which mirrors the principles of IM. Domínguez-Folgeras (2025) or Botía-Morillas (2019) highlight the contradictions and resistance that these emerging norms generate in the Spanish case. However, further empirical research is necessary to explore how parenting is negotiated in egalitarian contexts, particularly in Spain, where both institutional structures and cultural norms may constrain efforts toward equal parenting.

While IM functions as a broader ideological and analytical framework, AP refers to a more specific set of child-rearing practices (Lee et al. 2014). AP promotes practices that emphasize physical closeness and emotional sensitivity between mother and child. These recommendations draw on a particular interpretation of attachment theory, advocating for constant maternal presence as essential for optimal child development. These parenting models, both IM and AP, are highly demanding and mirror broader trends in parenting cultures across nations (Bianchi et al. 2012; Damaske 2013; Minnotte 2023). They can reinforce essentialist gender beliefs, portraying women as biologically suited for caregiving, placing significant demands on women's time, energy, and emotional resources, and contributing to an unequal division of domestic labor.

Although the role of women in society has evolved, along with their aspirations and life goals, the ideal of IM may remain embedded in the collective imagination. In practice, this ideal often proves unfeasible, creating inner conflict and feelings of frustration, stress, anxiety, and guilt for some women. This debate is particularly relevant today in light of societal changes in women's roles and the rise of individualization and personal autonomy in modern life. These developments have given rise to new forms of motherhood and new questions regarding potential opportunities for more egalitarian gender dynamics in caregiving.

Professional mothers and new forms of doing motherhood

The concept of extensive mothering (EM) has recently emerged as a response to the dominant ideology of IM. This model redefines “good motherhood” not as constant, hands-on caregiving, but rather as overseeing children’s well-being, even when daily care is delegated to others, such as daycare providers (Faircloth 2023). Married mothers, particularly those from higher classes, are often able to outsource caregiving while maintaining managerial control over children’s schedules, development, and needs (Bonino and Jurado-Guerrero 2025; O’Brien et al 2025).

From a gender equality perspective, EM could be a potentially liberating model (Cristopher 2012), allowing mothers to reject the time-intensive demands of IM. However, this model depends on the availability of others and can reproduce class and gender inequalities. If care is delegated to other women, it just redistributes the burdens of mothering and can reveal social class disparities. While upper-class mothers can afford childcare, low-income ones depend more heavily on extended family networks, leading to unequal experiences of stress and responsibility.

In Spain, similar dynamics are evident. Solé and Parella (2004) describe “semi-present” or “shared” motherhood, where care is delegated to extended family (especially grandmothers) or domestic workers. Despite this, many mothers report guilt and stress due to the enduring influence of IM ideals. Additionally, professional women often face career penalties or emotional conflict due to the demanding nature of their work and the lack of male co-responsibility, who do not engage in routine care tasks. More recent studies, such as Botía-Morillas (2019), point to the emergence of the “new mother” or the “partially undoing gender mother” according to Deutsch (2007). They incorporate non-traditional elements into their maternal identity and recognize their own needs, but retain aspects of traditional motherhood, like emotional attachment to caregiving.

While mothers may have discursively egalitarian ideals, structural inequalities often persist in household power dynamics and daily practices. As several studies have shown (Komter 1989; Nyman et al. 2018; Wong and Daminger 2024), the appearance of mutual decision-making often masks enduring gender hierarchies. Parenthood can intensify these dynamics, with women being pushed back into more traditional caregiving roles, even within seemingly egalitarian relationships.

Another limitation of prior studies arises when analysing women’s "choices" between career and motherhood, often classifying them according to a central identity or understanding these classifications as closed boundaries (Settle and Brumley 2014; Toffoletti and Starr 2016). Yet, recent research argues that women’s employment and maternal status should be analyzed in tandem, as their economic and caregiving roles are deeply related (Arteaga 2021; Dow 2016). We adopt this integrated analytical approach, a perspective well established in feminist scholarship (Arteaga 2021; García-Lorenzo et al. 2024), rejecting rigid divisions between

productive and reproductive labor. This allows us to examine the mechanisms through which different understandings and transformations of motherhood emerge and their consequences, depending on women's social class trajectories.

We address these gaps by adopting a time-use perspective and doing gender approach (West and Zimmerman 1987) to examine how care responsibilities are organized and enacted daily. Focusing on the temporal distribution of care and the symbolic value attached to time allocation, we explore how mothers navigate, resist, or reproduce gendered expectations of motherhood in relation to their class trajectories. Empirically, we develop a continuum of mothering practices through three analytical lenses: intensive mothering, ambivalent resistance, and extensive mothering. In fact, few studies have precisely untangled resistances to IM, even if some, like Wall (2010) or Domínguez-Folgueras (2025), detect them; they need further conceptualization.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting one final area of empirical interest. Mothering sometimes involves long-term caregiving responsibilities. However, these are not understood as care in terms of reciprocity and moral obligation (Cano 2018), as is the case with long-term care for dependent adults. Discourses around the care for dependent children are constructed around the idea of motherhood. A handful of papers have studied mothering experiences of neurodiverse children (Owens-Schill et al. 2025, Williams and Murray 2015), but not in the Spanish context.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the different subjective experiences and representations surrounding motherhood, a qualitative methodological strategy was used. This approach is appropriate for analyzing subjective and symbolic representations of mothering from a time-use perspective (Bianchi et al. 2012; Sullivan 2013), while also taking into account class trajectories (Seid 2022). The research technique used is the semi-structured interview (Verd and Lozares, 2016), which allowed for an in-depth understanding of mothering experiences in both symbolic and material terms. Based on this empirical evidence, an analysis was carried out to obtain a dynamic approximation of the reconfigurations of gender roles, considering class trajectories, in some cases in convergence with migratory processes.

To conduct the interviews, a purposive sampling method was used, the population being mothers living in the main urban areas of Catalonia (Spain). The women interviewed were drawn from a broader typological sample from a study on gender roles in time-use patterns, in which dual-income heterosexual couples were interviewed, selected based on variables such as social class, life cycle, and origin (Moreno-Colom et al. 2023). For our specific sample, we selected all the women interviewed who were mothers and characterized them according to their class trajectory and caregiving characteristics based on their children (age, number, situation). The sample consists of 10 native mothers, 4 of whom have caregiving responsibilities for dependent children, and 10 immigrant women from South America, 4 of whom also have dependent children.

The recruitment process took place through the social network of all those who participated in the research, using a snowball strategy. Compliance with the university's ethical standards was guaranteed for the interviews[1], which included the informed consent of the interviewees and the confidentiality agreement on the part of the research staff. The interview script is published as

part of the methodology paper of the whole project (Moreno-Colom et al. 2023). The questions were grouped into three thematic blocks: (1) time-use in everyday life, considering domestic labor, child-rearing time, and paid work; (2) biographical trajectory; and (3) relational aspects linked to time use and the distribution of work, to capture conflicts, contradictions, and mechanisms of justification.

The data analysis presented below is based on audio recordings of the in-depth interviews, their verbatim transcripts, and the coding using Atlas.ti software. A deductive qualitative content analysis was performed (Mayring 2000; Mayring 2014), although it was open to new emerging categories during the analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). A codebook was designed, and each interview was coded collaboratively by the research team. This ensured complementarity and validation throughout the analysis and fostered interpretive consensus through successive team discussions.

The data analysis consisted of two parallel phases. The first focused on constructing class trajectory profiles for each interviewee; the second connected these trajectories to mothering experiences to develop typologies. Firstly, the intention was to visually represent the evolution of each mother's social class from her family of origin to the present day, taking into account the arrival of her first child and possible migration journeys. This information was obtained from the biographical questions in the interview, in which the different women discussed their life trajectories up to the present day. Based on Seid's (2022) trajectory perspective, social class is operationalized following Crompton's (2013) proposal, who considers that the type of occupation (according to level of education and socio-occupational category) offers a good approximation to the class structure from a gender perspective, as it conditions the articulation of paid work with domestic and care work.

Thus, a set of structural variables was considered, and social class was categorized according to level of education and socioeconomic category. Given that our main objective is to nuance social class trajectories and study how they impact gender roles and diverse forms of mothering, the class variable does not identify each interviewee (ID), and we instead used the country of origin and children's characteristics. Based on this, Table 1 presents the sociological characterization of the analyzed cases.

Table 1. Recruited mothers and their main characteristics.

Age	Country	Children and care characteristics	Current class	Class trajectory	Years since migration	ID
54	Brazil	2 grown-up children recently emancipated	Working	Long-lived downgrading _	15	OlderChildren_Brazil
42	Colombia	1 child aged below 12	Middle	V or reversed downgrading	8	YoungChild_Colombia
25	Colombia	1 child aged below 12, severe autism	Working	Line ---	8	YoungChild_Autism_ Colombia
47	Colombia	1 grown-up dependent child	Working	Downgrading with previous upgrading /\	20	OlderChild_Disabled_ Colombia
38	Colombia	2 children aged below 12	Working	Recent downgrading \	4	YoungChildren_Colombia
43	Ecuador	3 non-emancipated grown-up children	Working	Line ---	23	OlderChildren_Ecuador
38	Peru	1 child aged below 12, severe autism	Working	Recent downgrading \	4	YoungChild_Autism_Peru
47	Spain	1 child aged below 12	Working	Line ---		YoungChild_Spain

42	Spain	1 child aged below 12, severe autism	Working	Line ---		YoungChild_Autism_Spain
48	Spain	2 children aged 12-18	Working	Line ---		OlderChildren_Spain
37	Spain	2 children aged below 12	Working	Line ---		YoungChildren_Spain1
41	Spain	2 children aged below 12	Middle	_/ Upgrading		YoungChildren_Spain2
42	Spain	2 children aged below 12	Middle	Line ---		YoungChildren_Spain3
45	Spain	2 children aged below 12	Middle	_/ Upgrading		YoungChildren_Spain4
48	Spain	2 children aged below 12	Middle	Line ---		YoungChildren_Spain5
37	Spain	2 children aged below 12, 1 of which dependent	Middle	_/ Upgrading		YoungChildren_OneDisabled_ Spain
44	Spain	2 children, 1 non-emancipated grown-up and 1 aged 12-18, both dependent	Middle	V or reversed downgrading		OlderChildren_Disabled_ Spain
36	Venezuela	1 child aged below 12	Working	Recent downgrading \	4	YoungChild_Venezuela
50	Venezuela	2 children, 1 dependent adult child and 1 aged 12-18	Middle	V or reversed downgrading	8	OlderChildren_OneDisabled_ Venezuela
53	Venezuela	3 children, 2 non-emancipated grown-ups and 1 aged 12-18	Middle	Long-lived downgrading _	7	OlderChildren_Venezuela

Secondly, we linked class trajectory to mothering experiences to capture its different types. To this end, the ideal types of “intensive mothering” and “extensive mothering” identified conceptually in the specialized literature (Christopher 2021; Domínguez-Folgueras 2025; Faircloth 2023; Hays 1996) were taken as a reference. However, the analysis revealed a third, intermediate typology, which we term “ambivalent”. Each type is now addressed, accounting for class trajectory, life cycle, domestic power mechanisms, and discursive practices using the concepts by Komter (1989) and Nyman et al. (2018). These three resulting types of mothering are defined based on the material and symbolic dimensions of child-rearing times. In other words, intensive mothering focuses on parenting time, while extensive mothering is characterized by a focus on work time, functionality, and compensation for the lack of parenting time. Ambivalent mothering emerges when a nuanced gradation of mothering experiences is made from a time-use perspective, and the existence of this intermediate typology, which shares aspects with both intensive and extensive mothering, is observed. The following section discusses each typology in detail.

RESULTS

Building on the theoretical debates previously outlined and the interviews conducted, this section characterizes mothering experiences into three groups that form a continuum between intensive and extensive mothering. Our main contribution is the identification of the continuum: both because the ambivalent type, not previously theoretically contemplated, emerges, and because in each ideal type, internal heterogeneity is captured, revealing a gradation within categories. Table 2 summarizes the cases analyzed with their main characteristics.

Table 2. Results of the analysis: mothering types as a continuum from intensive to extensive.

Group	Subtype of mothering	Typical class trajectory	Most common motherhood phase	Power mechanisms and common discourses	Cases
Intensive mothers	Monopoly of motherhood	Working class (linear social class trajectory)	All ages, no disabilities	No frustration, naturalization of intensive mothering. Role and material inertia without questioning it.	OlderChildren_Ecuador OlderChildren_Spain YoungChildren_Spain1
	Journey from class expectations to maternal aspirations	Migrant trajectories with long-lived class downgrading	Older children, closer to empty nests	Material frustration, since they solve it symbolically through the reification of mothering. Devotion to children and self-identification with mothering.	OlderChildren_Brazil OlderChildren_Venezuela
	Frustration due to recent social class downgrading	High social class migrants who have suffered a very recent and abrupt downgrading	Young children, really desired motherhoods	Material and symbolic frustration, awareness of being intensive mothers creates a need to renegotiate roles, but there is often resistance from the husband.	YoungChild_Autism_Peru YoungChildren_Colombia
	Frustration due to sudden infant disabilities	Working class (linear social class trajectory)	Young children with special needs	Material frustration due to child-rearing costs and living conditions. Resignation to intensive mothering, but maternal expectations have been managed.	YoungChild_Autism_ Colombia YoungChild_Autism_ Spain
Ambivalent mothers (cont.)	Complex downgrading and migrant trajectories	Unstable class trajectories, currently working class with no material stability	Heterogenous, one child, migration triggered by unexpected pregnancies	Material inertia, with double frustration due to precarity and gender inequality. Centrality of care in material but not symbolic terms, desire for change, but lack of resources.	OlderChild_Disabled_ Colombia YoungChild_Colombia YoungChild_Venezuela
	Functional intensive childrearing	Heterogenous	Heterogenous	General frustration, solved through extensive patterns, despite symbolically intensive mothering ideals. Centrality of care, with some externalization, untypical family arrangements.	OlderChildren_Disabled_ Spain YoungChild_Spain
	Guilt-compensating professional mothers	Middle class, with current good stability	Young children, desired pregnancies	Husband's resistance to getting involved, emotional frustration. Relative reification and “new” or “professional” motherhoods, shaped by guilt.	YoungChildren_Spain4 YoungChildren_Spain5
Extensive mothers	Technification and outsourcing	Higher class (native-born or long-lived migrations)	Desired pregnancies	Some overestimated husband’s involvement, lack of current conflict. Lowered domestic standards to focus on care.	OlderChildren_One Disabled_Venezuela YoungChildren_One Disabled_Spain
	The illusion of co-responsibility	Middle class, often from working class origin (upgrading)	Desired pregnancies	No explicit resistance from husbands, even though mothers bear the mental burden. Apparent consensus, absence of symbolic identification with motherhood.	YoungChildren_Spain2 YoungChildren_Spain3

Secondly, we present an analysis of mothering experiences according to their typology, using the material and symbolic dimensions of child-rearing time as empirical reference points. These derive from the interviewees’ self-reports of everyday life, biographical details, and subjective experiences. In addition to basing the analysis on theoretical references, we illustrate it with verbatim quotes from the interviews. Analytically, the objective is twofold: to situate mothering experiences in relation to class trajectories and to examine the discursive transformations that motherhood brings to gender and power relations within the couple.

Empirical evidence is also supported by graphs depicting each case's class trajectory (represented on the vertical axis, categorized 0-1) over time (reflected on the horizontal axis, from youth to the present). In addition, the most relevant turning points in life are indicated: birth of the first child (marked with a cross) and, if that's the case, migration to Catalonia (a black vertical line), as well as possible previous migrations (gray line).

Intensive mothering experiences: monopoly, displaced aspirations, and material frustrations

Nine of the twenty cases analyzed fall within the end of the continuum where the mothering experience is markedly intensive. The common characteristic that defines this large group is a strong identification with the maternal role, both materially and symbolically. However, as Table 2 shows, these mothers are far from forming a homogeneous block. They display varying degrees of intensiveness within the continuum, depending on the influence of their class background on their life experiences. Despite this gradation within the group, it is noteworthy that this typology only includes features specific to intensive mothering.

First, we find women with virtually linear working-class trajectories (see Figure 1), most of whom are of native origin. For them, intensive mothering manifests as a double maternal presence. Their routine is marked by mothering continuously, without interruption, being primarily responsible for all reproductive tasks, which condition and contaminate their whole daily lives. Symbolically, they construct their identity around a desire to be present and identify with the maternal role, in the absence of career expressiveness and aspirations; they only seek compatibility with motherhood.

> *They come first. You take a second role. Completely, like completely. If you go shopping at the flea market, for example, you come out with ten T-shirts, and none of those ten T-shirts are for you. They're all for your boy, your girl, even your husband.* (OlderChildren_Spain)

Overall, mothering monopolizes these women's lives. They reproduce their working-class background in the absence of frustrated expectations or aspirations, and they perpetuate gender roles, through a mixture of inertia and resignation, faced with their male partners' resistance to shared responsibility.

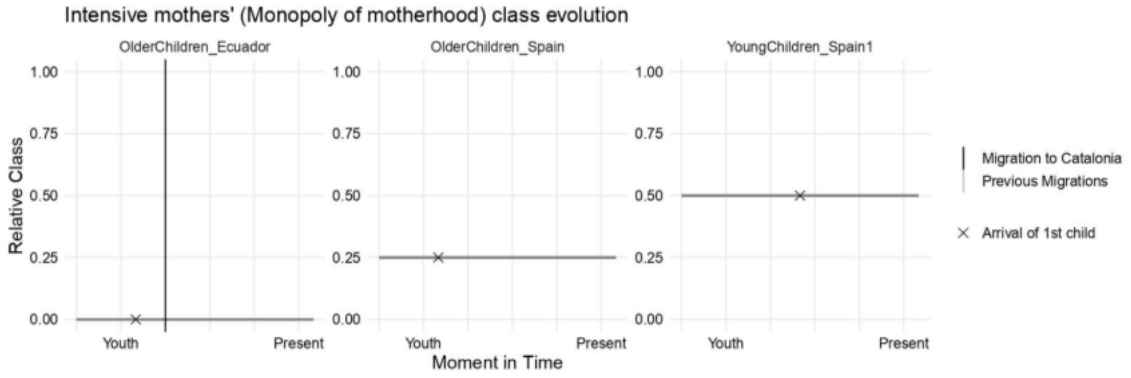


Figure 1. Class trajectory graphs of *Monopoly of motherhood* mothers.

Secondly, within the intensive mothering group, a set of women emerges whose middle-class expectations have become maternal aspirations. This group of mothers, who are of migrant origin with long-lived downward social mobility (see Figure 2) and empty nesters, shows how class

downgrading pulls profiles who once approached child-rearing more extensively toward intensive mothering, marking a regression in gender equality. In both interviewees, the arrival of motherhood was unexpected and triggered the migratory trajectory, which in turn implies a process of downward mobility that ends up reifying the maternal experience.

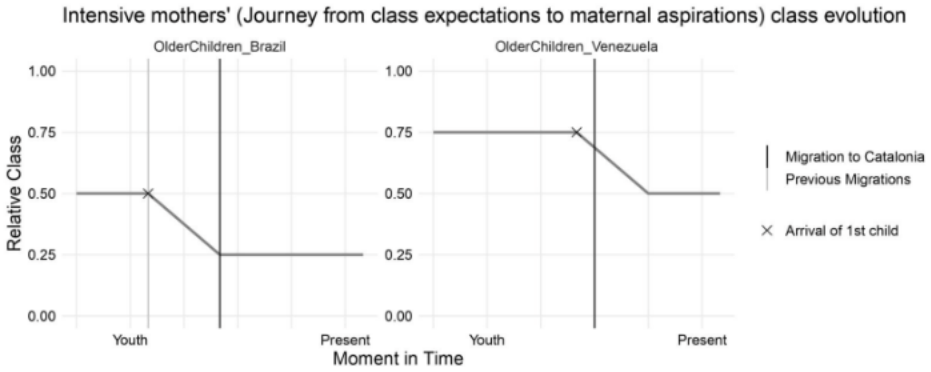


Figure 2. Class trajectory graphs of *Journey from class expectations to maternal aspirations* mothers.

The first case interviewed had periods where she developed daily strategies of materially extensive mothering, such as outsourcing her daughter's childcare. However, the daily intensity of this combination within a gendered unequal household arrangement led her to leave her job. This point coincided with her first migration and bureaucratic difficulties, and the traditional gendered roles and intensive mothering were reproduced. In the second case interviewed, the material living conditions prevail upon arrival in Spain, where financial and professional setbacks led her to give up her design career, become a full-time mother and abandon paid work. Currently, despite the transition to an empty nest, motherhood continues to be central to her daily life in both material and symbolic terms.

> *I make up errands if I don't have any, and go out. Yesterday I went to the supermarket, I'm... I do things for my children, to help them, because they also work and study at the same time. My role is to be the hen, the protector. I love having my little eggs like that. And that's it, they're already chickens. But my role is like maintaining...* (OlderChildren_Venezuela)

In contrast, the profiles of migrant women with much more recent downward mobility (see Figure 3), younger children, and irregular legal or administrative situations, have not yet transferred their frustration to maternal aspirations. Therefore, they constitute a subgroup within intensive mothering characterized by frustration and resignation. We find two cases of this frustration due to regression, but also two cases of frustration due to sudden disability.

The two women who expressed frustration linked to regression are characterized by resignation resulting from class downgrading due to migration processes, which have generated a precariousness that leads them to intensive mothering in material terms, although they did not initially identify with it symbolically. In fact, both admit having had resistance to the maternal role. However, when motherhood arrived, coinciding with the migratory process and downward class mobility, adverse conditions reactivated traditional expectations and dissolved their resistance, giving way to resignation to intensive mothering.

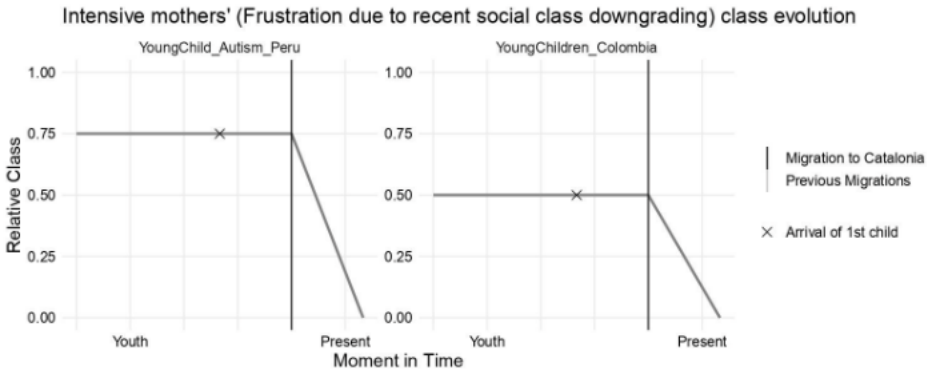


Figure 3. Class trajectory graphs of *Frustration due to recent social class downgrading* mothers.

The loss of class privileges leads them to accept material precariousness and prioritize their children's wellbeing, reinforcing traditional roles, and making mothering the central focus of their lives. Despite great frustration, it being a recent class downgrading prevents this from fully transforming into a maternal ideal or from abandoning paid work entirely, despite not being able to pursue their previous vocational profession. Negotiations, doubts, and the mental burden of managing domestic precariousness predominate, while the symbolic value of motherhood is renegotiated from a place of frustration and social regression.

> *Your life goals change, your life purposes, your life objectives. All of this changes. Before, it was my medical specialty, my purpose, along with mothering, and now, to date, that hasn't yet manifested. Ten years have passed* (since the son's arrival)*, and it hasn't happened. (YoungChild_Autism_Peru)*

The remaining two cases of intensive mothering due to frustration stem from sudden caregiving responsibilities rather than class regression. These are two working-class cases (see Figure 4) with linear life trajectories, consistently adverse material circumstances, and who have children with special needs. Their dependencies are such that intensive mothering seems materially unescapable, despite symbolically seeing outsourcing logics due to the children's needs. For them, being a mother is not part of a life plan and, probably, had their children not been dependent, their roles as mothers would be different. In these cases, intensive mothering emerges as an imposition of material circumstances: the intensity of care makes it impossible to devote time to anything other than care. This imposition sometimes leads to the reification of child-rearing rather than mothering per se.

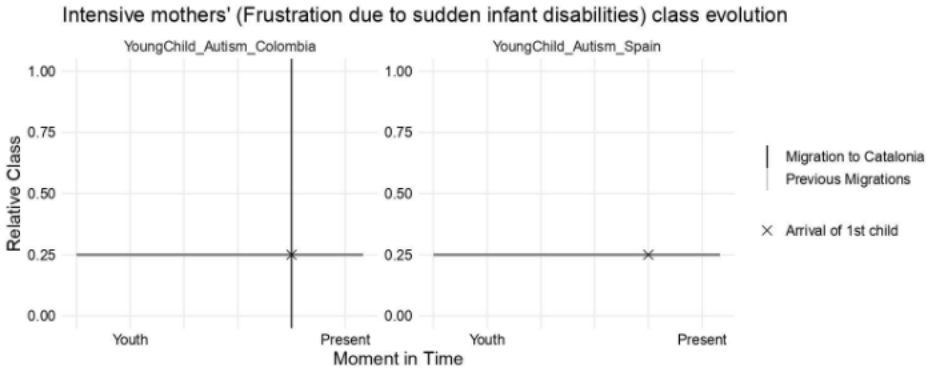


Figure 4. Class trajectory graphs of *Frustration due to sudden infant disabilities* mothers.

Their frustration with the material demands of caregiving makes them wish that their children did not have special needs because “it would be less of a hassle” (YoungChild_Autism_Colombia). The desire is not to have a neurotypical child because of unfulfilled expectations of motherhood, but because of the financial demands it entails. Thus, the expectations are managed or assumed, and both rationalize the intensity of mothering:

> *Not being able to shower, not having my own privacy. That's been taken away from me, but hey. [laughs] It's okay. It's a sacrifice that... I don't care. And you see people go, "Oh, you used to dress so cute". And I, I don't care. It's different. When you have a child with difficulties, your priorities and structures change completely. So, what's important? That he evolves. I'm already evolved. If I have to go backwards, I'll go backwards, if that makes him go up. (YoungChild_Autism_Spain)*

Ambivalent mothering experiences: complex class downgrading, functionality in caregiving, and compensating for guilt

Ambivalent mothering combines elements of both intensive and extensive types, making contradiction a defining feature of this profile. However, this is not a homogeneous group, and different cases can be identified based on the material and symbolic dimensions of child-rearing. The group includes seven women, all of whom have a clear material focus on motherhood in their daily lives. Similarly, all of them receive some support from fathers or relatives, though care responsibility remains primarily maternal. The mechanisms and discourses behind these common aspects allow us to identify different ambivalent subgroups, which, in turn, can be explained by their material living conditions, with class trajectory being a fundamental aspect. All in all, there is negotiation between intensive and extensive practices, which are defined by factors like class downgrading, functionality, and guilt compensation.

First, following the logic of the continuum from Table 2, there is the case of three women of foreign origin. Their pregnancies were unplanned and caused an interruption in their professional careers, while also motivating the migratory project that led to downward mobility (see Figure 5). In these cases, aspects of intensive mothering were present at the material level, yet not at the symbolic level, where the work project continues to weigh heavily.

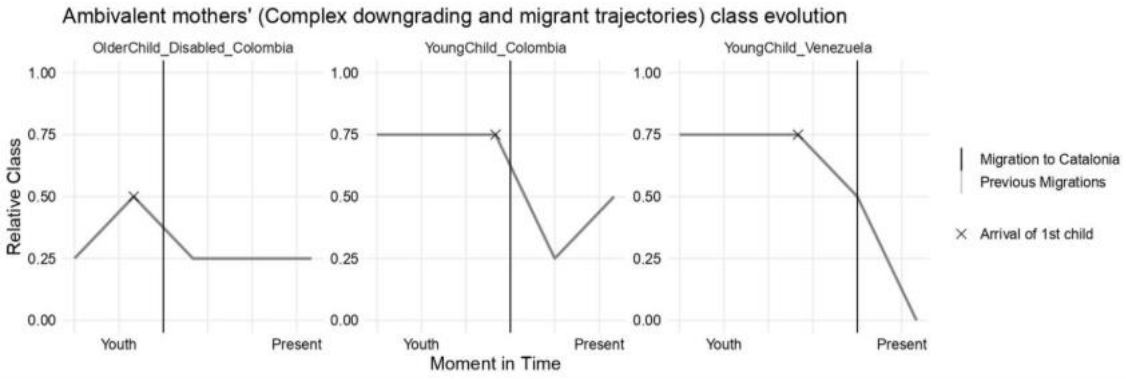


Figure 5. Class trajectory graphs of *Complex downgrading and migrant trajectories* mothers.

The deterioration of material conditions contributed to a re-traditionalization of gender roles, positioning these women as the primary caregivers and placing intensive mothering practices on them. Although their partners are also involved, it is due too material necessity rather than conviction. Still, women do not give up on pursuing their professional goals and motherhood does

not have a monopoly on their aspirations. They actively resisted abandoning their careers, particularly in the two middle-class cases, where downward mobility was most acute.

> *My girl leaves school at 4:30 p.m., and I'm definitely a "mamá gallina"* (mother hen)*, 'cause no, I'm not gonna put her with a babysitter I don't know or pay for one when I'm there. For me, it's essential that when she leaves school, either I or her dad are there. If I'm not there, her dad has to be there. (…)*
>
> *But well, let's settle on this, on hairdressing for now, because, of course, imagine studying engineering and then leaving it on the back burner. It's a shame. I really think that, when we're a little more stable, I'll start studying engineering again. Yes, I'd like to get my degree recognized and find a job.* (YoungChild_Venezuela)

Secondly, within ambivalent mothering, two Spanish-born women from different social classes illustrate what we describe as intensive functional parenting. Both reproduce intensive mothering norms at the material and symbolic levels, yet these coexist with extensive practices involving others, adopted to ensure day-to-day functionality. In one case, this arises from a couple's separation, in the other, from the intense care needs of her children (Figure 6).

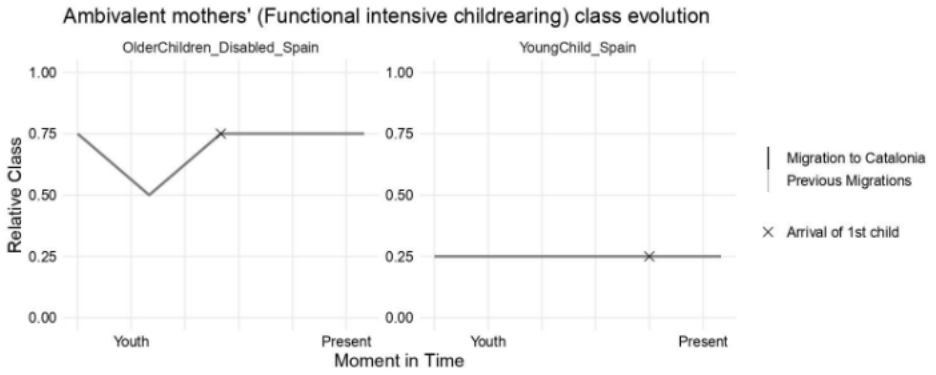


Figure 6. Class trajectory graphs of *Functional intensive childrearing* mothers.

The first woman within this subgroup has a working-class profile, where the ambivalence is explained by a separation from her partner, implying a functionality of extensive parenting. Poor socioeconomic conditions explain why she continues to live with her daughter's father. In this sense, there is a certain degree of shared responsibility given the material circumstances, although she reproduces the discourse of intensive motherhood. The second profile represents a middle-class trajectory in which intensive mothering is symbolically central, while material conditions enable the outsourcing of part of the caregiving. Her high level of dedication to professional work, experienced as a core life project, further reinforces this ambivalence.

> *I don't get anxiety from it because I think, listen, I'm away and there're other people, you know… Let her father take care, or granny, or someone else. In the end, no... but I just... I'm actually very cold-hearted about this, because listen, I already take care of everything, huh? Everyday, all the time. (*OlderChildren_Disabled_Spain)

However, despite this material technification seen in her management of care, she symbolically naturalizes her role as a caregiver, placing it above her maternal identity. She is primarily responsible for her children's care (both dependent due to mental health issues), and she also

takes care of her mother-in-law and husband. Her biographical trajectory probably accounts for this aspect, as she was orphaned while still underage.

> *I think I have a caregiver role. My therapist always told me, and my family always says, "you've assumed that role." Honestly, I don't know. As a person, I don't see myself like that, but I actually am. I'm very caring, you know? (*OlderChildren_Disabled_Spain)

Finally, we find two ambivalent women who have intensive mothering practices linked to their desire to be mothers. However, simultaneously, their middle-class status and professional situations (see Figure 7) entail the ideal of shared responsibility and require the fathers' participation. Still, if the women are absent from care, they feel obliged to compensate for the guilt they feel.

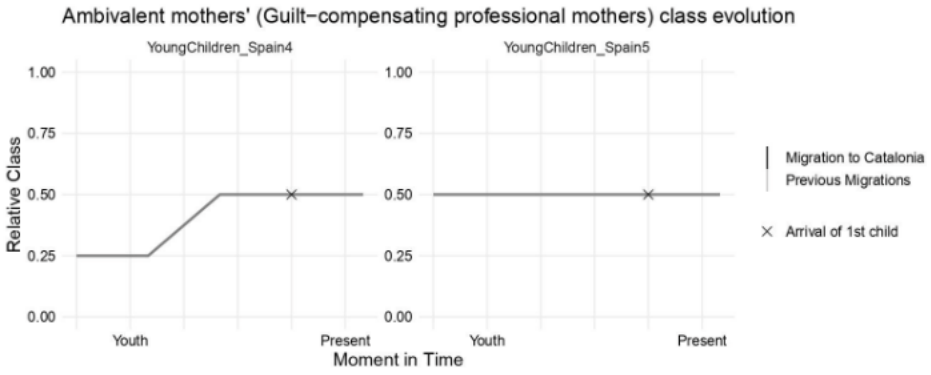


Figure 7. Class trajectory graphs of *Guilt-compensating professional* mothers.

For these women, the tension between intensive and extensive mothering reflects the interplay between maternal desire, professional success, and the demand for personal time. When work or individual circumstances limit their availability to fulfill the desired mother role, they overcompensate to fulfill their aspirations for intensive mothering. This dynamic is feasible only under favorable middle-class material conditions and some involvement from their husbands, without reaching co-responsibility. A reverse meaning to the experiences of class-downgraded mothers can be observed: while migrant women are ambivalent because they refuse to give up their professional careers despite unexpected motherhood, these Spanish-born middle-class women are ambivalent because their professional careers make them feel guilty in their desired role as mothers.

> *"Right now, my mission is to survive and try to make them as happy as possible. It's a situation where we're just getting by. There's granny, and granny, and granny, she takes up a lot of space, but I always try to make up for that with them. Like, hey, how about… a Lego exhibition? Or going to the movies and popcorn? You know? I try to add a bit of color, because otherwise it's really depressing."* (YoungChildren_Spain5)

Extensive mothering experiences: technification and the illusion of co-responsibility

Extensive mothering is characterized by the absence of intensive mothering and the accumulation of the three possibilities of ambivalent mothering: a strong professional career, functional and outsourced management of care, and compensation strategies. This category of mothering experiences includes mothers whose middle-class material conditions allow them to balance child-rearing and a professional career. However, the traditional ideology of motherhood continues

to operate in their subjective representations of the maternal experience. They maintain discourses emphasizing the value of the emotional bond with their children and have compensation strategies linked to feelings of guilt, although these are more rationalized than in ambivalent mothers. The group includes four women, all of whom experience this contradiction between the material and symbolic dimensions, always with prior and explicit conflicts over parenting expectations with their children's fathers, but two main trends can be identified.

On the one hand, there are two middle-class cases (see Figure 8) whose routines are characterized by the logic of technification and outsourcing of care, often relying on a technological rationality of efficiency, monitoring, surveillance, etc. Co-responsibility is limited, but there are mechanisms and discursive practices that overvalue their partners' involvement, presenting an image of apparent consensus and absence of conflict, which were previously present but have now been resolved. Both women have children with special needs, but they have extremely organized routines, and other caregivers are involved.

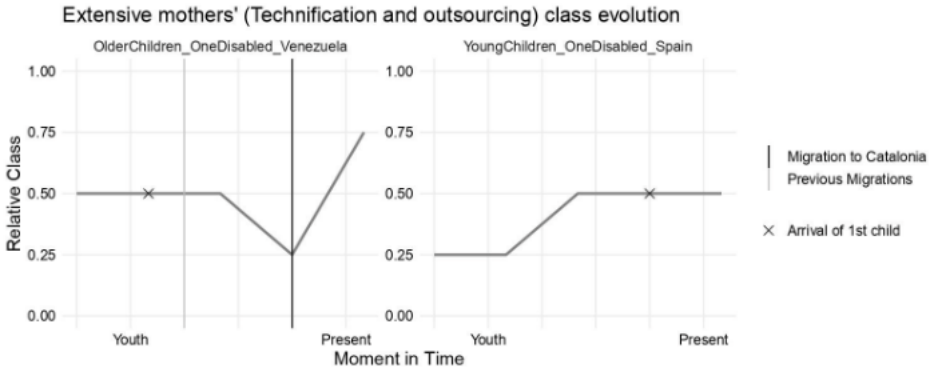


Figure 8. Class trajectory graphs of *Technification and outsourcing* mothers.

For OlderChildren_OneDisabled_Venezuela, an initial migration process linked to a class downgrading caused a re-traditionalization of gender roles as she took on full responsibility for caring for her child. Her migration to Spain allowed her to regain her original middle-class status, refocusing on her professional career and outsourcing most of the caregiving. This paradigmatic dynamism can also be observed at present: while she is an extensive mother to her dependent son, with her younger, non-dependent daughter, she would be closer to an ambivalent pattern.

YoungChildren_OneDisabled_Spain also relies on a caregiver in the mornings and a very organized routine that is materially egalitarian with her daughters' father, with whom she lives despite being separated. Past conflicts repeatedly arise, mainly due to differences in domestic standards, but these have been managed to achieve functional extensiveness at a material level.

> *Little by little we're getting there, we're working on it, I've worked on it a lot in therapy too and they've taught me, hmm... To delegate. At first, I really hated that word, because if you have to delegate, it looks like you want to keep all of it for yourself. But it's not that you're gatekeeping; it's that you need to get things done, and if the other person doesn't take responsibility, you gotta do it.* (YoungChildren_OneDisabled_Spain)

Both women have children with very high dependency needs, but their routine and daily life do not appear during the interview because they have outsourced tasks and are extremely organized. Everything is meticulously coordinated and choreographed so that they maintain their

professional identity and free time. However, they manage this organization themselves and carry the mental load. While this type of extensive mothering resembles some ambivalent mothers (functional child-rearing and guilt-compensating professional ones), the main difference is that these two extensive cases have managed to impose extensive, technical, and functional parenting and to prioritize their own identity beyond motherhood.

The second subtype of extensive mothering also involves routinization and delegation of care, but the main difference from the previous subgroup lies in the degree of shared responsibility. We find middle-class mothers (see Figure 9) with dual presence, where their partners' greater involvement in care work allows for a more egalitarian organization.

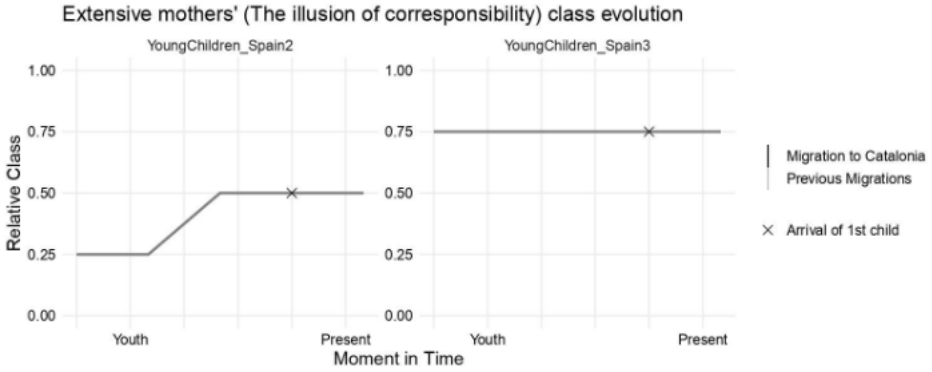


Figure 9. Class trajectory graphs of *The illusion of co-responsibility* mothers.

Expectations of their male partners' involvement change depending on class status and generate differences in the perception of inequalities. For YoungChildren_Spain2, traditional gender socialization in a working-class context is linked to perceptual biases that overestimate her husband's involvement under an apparent consensus. In contrast, YoungChildren_Spain3, with a socialization in a middle-class egalitarian context, is aware of the unequal distribution of reproductive tasks and feels more frustrated by male resistance. In both cases, the conflict or negotiation within the couple is what generates greater involvement by male partners. However, this does not eliminate the persistence of inequalities in reproductive work: shared responsibility is merely an illusion or mirage, and mothers continue to bear the mental load, as well as the heaviest and most routine tasks.

> *Drowned and very tired, exactly. I also like to do a lot at work, and here at home too. I make lots of plans, and I overestimate my energy levels (...). Sometimes I spend the afternoons with them* (daughters)*, but I'm only half there because I've given my all at work, and I've eaten quickly and I'm digesting, catching the bus to take them to their after-school activities. I feel very tired, so I don't... Well, now I have much less free time to go out with friends. Much less.* (YoungChildren_Spain3)

Despite varying degrees of awareness of inequality, both women reject the ideology of intensive mothering and resist the social mandate of the "good mother." Still, they are unable to avoid taking responsibility for caregiving or feelings of guilt. For example, YoungChildren_Spain2, with her night shifts, manages to be a mother by day and a worker by night, ensuring her dual presence. Compared to ambivalent mothers with feelings of guilt, at the discursive level, the compensation strategies of extensive mothers make frequent reference to motherhood as an era and to parenting as something intensive but shared and plural.

> *We're also very aware that this is now, that is, it's that moment when they depend on us. Tomorrow, when they no longer depend on us, we'll see then; we'll figure out our shifts and how to manage things. We know this is only for a few years. I think that once you're aware of all this, you handle it better.* (YoungChildren_Spain2)

Overall, this subgroup of extensive mothers values their autonomy beyond the emotional bond with their children, and they aspire to reserve time and space for themselves as their children grow up. Their stronger commitment to professional and personal projects reduces the emotional weight of guilt and differentiates their experience from ambivalent mothers. For them, compensation strategies serve as rational temporary adjustments rather than emotional lifelines.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has analyzed mothering experiences according to the class trajectories of different women living in dual-income straight couples in Spain. The empirical evidence presented contributes to theoretical debates on new forms of motherhood (Botía-Morillas 2019; Christopher 2012; Domínguez-Folgueras 2025; Wall 2010) and their impact on the autonomy of women as working mothers (Bogino and Jurado-Guerrero 2025; Solé and Parella 2004; O'Brien et al. 2025). Although research on motherhood is not new, the social changes brought about by the massive incorporation of women into the workforce, together with the increase in time devoted to childcare, raise new questions about gender relations.

Concepts such as intensive mothering (Hays 1996), attachment parenting (Domínguez-Folgueras 2025; Lee et al. 2014), and extensive mothering (Faircloth 2023) have emerged to explain the growing social value attributed to the constant physical or symbolic presence of the maternal figure. One of the debates surrounding these concepts questions the degree of autonomy or oppression that motherhood brings to women in paid employment. While some voices attribute a liberating potential to extensive mothering (Christopher 2012), others advocate for the weight of gender and social class as reproducers of inequality through intensive mothering (Sánchez-Mira 2022).

This paper contributes to the debate by providing new empirical evidence that accounts for child-rearing time, as well as the existing gap in the analysis of resistance to intensive mothering (Domínguez-Folgueras 2025). Specifically, from the theoretical base of the social and heterogeneous nature of motherhood (Dow 2016; Moore, 1999), and following Minnotte's (2023) proposal, we analyze how norms associated with the mothering role shape different experiences depending on women's social class trajectories (Seid 2022). Understanding motherhood as a social construct, we prove the heuristic potential of analyzing it in conjunction with employment (Arteaga 2021; Dow 2016) to capture the dynamism in gender relations (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The results obtained highlight issues identified in other research and allow for further exploration of some of them in the form of contributions.

In this sense, our main empirical contribution is the characterization of mothering experiences as a continuum that considers class trajectories as processes of social mobility, both upward and downward, which, in turn, influence gender roles as processes of change and regression. Three mothering types have been identified according to the intensity of time, material, and symbolic resources devoted to child-rearing: intensive, ambivalent, and extensive. These typologies allow

the classification of all experiences, including those with children who have special needs and different degrees of dependency. Even if there is a boundary between different mothering types, which is the delimitation identified as intensive, ambivalent, or extensive, this dynamic perspective reveals that ideal types are never fully reproduced. Rather, a gradation of subtypes emerges within each group, constituting the continuum. That is the main result of this research, and the classification of the cases interviewed is twofold: they are grouped according to the group and subgroup to which they belong.

The first group reflects intensive mothering experiences, which are linked to working-class linear trajectories, class-downgrading for migrant women, and some situations where child-rearing involves long-term care in precarious material conditions. This group is characterized solely by aspects related to intensiveness. In all cases, there is a strong material and symbolic link to the maternal role, although this occurs for different reasons related to the living material conditions, as noted by Sánchez-Mira (2022). This intensiveness of care reinforces the traditional gender role linked to motherhood in a redoing gender way (Deutsch 2007), and it is not necessarily related to attachment parenting, which had been identified in other studies as a practice of intensive mothering (Sánchez-Mira and Muntanyola-Saura 2020). Furthermore, cases of intensive mothers with frustration prove that resignation due to material setbacks and precarious realities also impacts and fuels frustrations in terms of gender equality after motherhood.

The second mothering group contains ambivalent mothers, who are characterized by including both intensive and extensive aspects. In this case, the coexistence of traditional and emerging traits of women's maternal role is most clearly apparent, and contradiction is present in all cases, in line with the observations of Wall (2010) and Domínguez-Folgueras (2025). This ambivalent dynamic is defined by factors related to complex migration and class downgrading processes, to functionality in the cases with dependent children, and to compensation for the guilt felt by Spanish mothers with skilled jobs. These ambivalent cases are mostly middle-class trajectories that exert weight on the experience of motherhood, which problematizes its intensive nature in relation to career aspirations. These results coincide, in part, with approaches that emerge in previous papers such as those by Faircloth (2023) and Domínguez-Folgueras (2025), who found a symbolic break with intensive mothering. However, as long as the material weight of child-rearing on mothers persists, largely due to the lack of greater involvement by fathers, gender relations continue the path of redoing rather than undoing (Botía-Morillas 2019; Deutsch 2007).

Finally, the third group is extensive mothering, who do not have any intensive aspect and combine a strong career plan, a functional approach to caregiving with techinifcation, and compensation strategies. Unlike the intensive profiles, the extensive type brings together the experiences of mothers whose middle-class material conditions allow them to organize their children's care differently from the previous cases. These are women who place great importance on their professional careers, but also on the symbolic value of parenting. However, the material importance of child-rearing time is reduced thanks to either a greater involvement of the father or the economic capacity to outsource some care responsibilities. In this sense, our findings are consistent with other research that highlights parenting styles based on mutual commitment (Christopher 2012), but we also find women with dependent children who technify long-term care. In both profiles, the results match other papers that identified new forms of mothering that partially break from traditional roles in a process of undoing gender (Botía-Morillas 2019; Deutsch 2007).

The empirical evidence presented proves that new forms of doing motherhood are a contemporary manifestation of the institutionalization of the feminine maternal role. In this sense, the second contribution of our paper is to show how seemingly consensual decisions around extensive mothering conceal the reproduction of gender hierarchies, in line with Wong and Daminger (2024) and Nyman et al. (2018). Similarly, we find similar results to other research which identifies practices of Spanish mothers as resistance to the ideology of intensive mothering (Domínguez-Folgueras 2025) and which shows how these new mothering types partly undo gender and partly reproduce it (Sánchez-Mira 2022; Botía-Morillas 2019). This contradiction and ambivalence are of special interest given Spain's familistic welfare context, which could partially explain the persistence of gendered caring roles.

We also find that the emergence of motherhood and the work involved in child-rearing can reinforce social inequalities (gender, class, and origin), for professional reasons (Bonino and Jurado-Guerero 2025; Poveda 2006; Domínguez-Folgueras 2022) or due to migration processes (León 2014; Uribe 2021; Kačkutė 2025). Ultimately, it is argued that new forms of mothering do not lead to the disappearance of gender inequalities, but rather to their transformation. At this point, a certain illusion linked to extensive mothering appears, where the appearance of novelty overshadows the persistence of tradition. It is presented as intensive parenting that, in principle, is shared by both parents, but in practice, female responsibility prevails.

This study is not free of limitations that could be considered for future lines of research. Only women in dual-income heterosexual couples were included in our study. Even if this was our chosen focus to analyze gendered inequalities after motherhood, expanding the continuum to include family-abolitionist positions such as the momrade (Lewis 2023) or women in same-sex couples remains a necessary step for specialized literature. Secondly, as other studies have shown (Kačkutė 2025), the diversity of migrant mothering experiences needs further research. We focused solely on the Latin American community because they represent half of the migrant community in Spain (Domingo et al. 2015). Lastly, our continuum and dynamic perspective could be strengthened with a longitudinal approach and repeated interviews as children grow up. This would capture change in time, social class trajectories, and allow for a nuanced doing and undoing gender perspective.

Still, our findings from this perspective are clear, as there is a common experience in all mothering types. In extensive mothering, it manifests in terms of technification in response to one's own individual project, in ambivalent mothering, in terms of compensation linked to guilt, and, in intensive mothering, in terms of resignation and frustration. But the explanatory key is the same: the persistence of unequal gender relations and the effect of redoing gender. In this sense, the article provides new empirical evidence that questions the extent to which traditional mothering in Spain is disappearing, in line with Domínguez-Folgueras (2025). Despite the transformations at the discursive and symbolic level, new forms of doing motherhood reflect the persistence of unequal gender relations in our capitalist system. This evidence invites us to reflect on the possibility of truly achieving new models of motherhood in this context.

ENDNOTE

[1] The project "Gender equality in the use of time: changes, resistance, and continuities-GENERA" has received a favorable report from the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ref. CEEAH 6435).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The code used to construct the graphs illustrating the social class trajectories can be found in a GitHub repository. The qualitative data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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