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THEY SAY, WE SAY: A STANDPOINT ANALYSIS OF
STAY-AT-HOME MOTHERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH
PUBLIC DISCOURSE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English
Writing, Rhetoric and Media

by
Ayesha Tanzila
December 2021

Accepted by:
Dr. Megan Eatman, Committee Chair
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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study stay-at-home mothers' engagement with the prevailing discourse surrounding them. Staying home and engaging in "invisible and unpaid" labor has led this group of mothers to be out of public sight and somewhat voiceless. Thus, public discourse about SAHMs without significant input by SAHMs has resulted in a monolithic and static identity. Using standpoint analysis as the theoretical framework and textual analysis as the methodology, I have analyzed opinion pieces written by SAHMs, published on popular magazine portals, and on their blogs, through which they attempt to navigate this public depiction of themselves. The analysis shows that SAHMs' engagement with public discourse about them can be categorized under three broad themes: overt prejudiced assumptions about SAHMs which are a part of the larger capitalist rhetoric, nuanced negative dismissive rhetoric against SAHMs, and lastly rhetoric of choice in relation to SAHMs.

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1. Introduction

Mia Redrick has been a working mom, a stay-at-home mom (SAHM), and a work-from-home mom over a period of 14 years of her motherhood journey. She wrote an article titled “A Woman’s Choice: The Right to Stay at Home” published on HUFFPOST to relate her SAHM experiences. Redrick stated that given her college education with a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and her experience related to working for a Fortune 500 company, the reaction of relatives and strangers regarding coming home to parent has been interesting. Friends and family would all ask her, “What is a smart girl like you doing home?” She went on to mention that when she decided to stay home with her children, she did not care or consider what others had to say or think about her choice. She added, “It was my choice. It was right. It was my preference.” She also mentioned how she never felt being a SAHM to be a death sentence since she planned to go back to work once her youngest child started kindergarten. Lastly, she concluded the article stating the level of cruelty the society shows towards SAHMs with subtle references to how their work is meaningless compared to the work done by others (both men and women) outside of the house. And that SAHMs have nothing to complain about since they are not engaged in anything substantial other than running after a toddler.

Redrick’s account allows us to conclude that she is educated, held a white-collar job, and could afford childcare, yet she chose to stay home with her children during their formative years. Mothers with profiles like Mia Redrick who quit work to assume the role of a SAHM are called “opt-out-moms”, a term coined by Lisa Belkin (Senior Columnist, The Huffington Post) in 2003. Though on the surface, Redrick seems a paragon of “choice” as well as very privileged, these characteristics did not help her escape critique. People openly demean her choice. Her “choice” is depicted as a trap; because she chose to be a SAHM, she cannot complain and is left alone to deal with the consequences.

Moreover, her situation provides a glimpse into broader problematic narratives around SAHMs: that they do not really do anything (their work is anything but meaningful and cannot be considered as a job, since their work does not earn a wage), that issues related to being a SAHM are not worthy of public or policy discussion, and that they became SAHMs because they

are not “smart”, educated or able to contribute to the workforce outside the home. In addition, Redrick’s narration shows how choice is the primary locus of conflict: did a woman choose to stay home? If so, not great! Essentially, when a mother decides to opt-out when she clearly can contribute to the economy, she has made a poor choice. On the other hand, when mothers stay home due to unavoidable circumstances, they are not spared of criticism either. Closer inspection suggests that such arguments are used to validate blaming mothers’ choice or lack thereof for any difficulties they face which in turn echoes that any or all choice to be bad for mothers. Another idea hinted at in Redrick’s piece is that the choice of being a SAHM is irreversible: once one becomes a SAHM, one cannot go back to being anything else.

The broad category of “stay-at-home” mothers includes not only those who say they are at home to care for their families but also mothers who are at home because they are unable to find work, are disabled, or are enrolled in school. Unlike Mia Redrick majority of SAHMs stay home out of necessity and not necessarily by choice. A close look reveals that society largely shapes and constructs the conditions that might force a mother to stay home. Between expensive childcare, the gender wage gap, discrimination against women in the workforce, a lack of maternity leave, and a lack of concrete family policies, is it any wonder that many women find it more costly—economically and psychologically—to work than stay at home. In her article “When Being a Stay-At-Home Mom Isn’t a Choice” published on HUFFPOST, Jillian Berman included accounts of many women who are stay-at-home mothers out of necessity. Chelsea Belander is one such mom, who is 22 and single, lives at her mother’s house rent-free with her one-year-old son, Finn. Belander does not have any income besides the child support payments she receives from Finn’s dad and the cash she earns from doing small jobs like mowing the lawn. But she’s calculated that the \$8 to \$10 an hour she’d make at the jobs available in her town of Brunswick, Maine, would barely cover the cost of childcare, which runs \$250 per week for a half-day. “That seems stupid to me,” Belander said of working just to pay for daycare. Berman also mentioned in her article various responses gathered by a post on the HuffPost Parents Facebook page soliciting comments from mothers and fathers who struggle to find work that pays for childcare. One of the prominent responses indicated that many of these struggling mothers face comments like “you are so lucky, I cannot afford to be a stay-at-home mom” when in reality, these burdened SAHMs cannot afford to work. Regardless of the situation, the choice of these troubled mothers is criticized, reiterating that choice is the primary locus of contention in the context of SAHMs. An overview of public discourse about SAHMs reveals that the circumstances

under which Mia Redrick stays home may not be the norm; however, the rhetoric around her choice is.

On the one hand, Redrick is assumed to be a SAHM who “has it all” and gets criticized, and on the other hand Chelsea Belander who is a SAHM out of necessity, is not treated any better. Furthermore, mothers who stay at home out of choice or because of necessity are given the status of being “selfless.” In addition to such imposed status, supposedly positive labels like supermom or superwoman often prevent SAHMs from reaching out for the support they require to carry on with the “choice” they made or did not make, respectively.

Often characterized as the “traditional mother” (Arendell; Coontz), the stay-at-home mother has been a mainstay in United States culture since the 1950s. This image has become an ideal version of what a “true” and “good” mother is and should be (Pare and Dillaway). It gained its popularity from the iconic homemaker imagery of the 1950s even as the number of employed women grew (Garey). Because of its embodiment of intensive mothering, the SAHM position has a stronghold in the U.S. (Boris). Given SAHM’s popularity as a model of motherhood, one would expect their experiences to be pleasant and free of judgments and stigmas; however, the stories related by SAHMs paint quite a different picture. In general, academic research on motherhood in the field of Rhetoric is limited and more so when it comes to SAHMs. Most of the current scholarship on motherhood rhetoric focuses on the working mothers (a model of motherhood which is depicted to be at the opposite end of the motherhood continuum) and their struggles. This is because this model is believed to be a deviation from the “ideal” model otherwise known as SAHM and thus faces dire consequences which demand to be explored and documented. For scholarship on working mothers see notes. Existing scholarship indicates SAHM to be the ideal form of motherhood. But is this really the case? Perhaps at some point it was, but not the case now.¹ Feminist scholars pretending that SAHMs are idealized broadly masks the prejudice these women face, and also contribute to promoting the idea that their experiences are not important or interesting enough to be researched. Thus, this thesis is an attempt to add to the motherhood scholarship through confronting the idea that SAHMs are celebrated theoretically and not in reality. Specifically, this paper aims to add a new dimension to the existing scholarship of motherhood rhetoric by exploring how blatant and subtle public discourse is used to dismiss the experiences of SAHMs. The idea that all women’s choices are

¹According to Bureau of Labor Statistics, 71% of all mothers in the U.S. are either looking for work or are engaged in some kind of paid labor outside the home as of 2020.

valid, but somehow being a SAHM is less valid, or is disqualified as a choice has prompted me to gauge an understanding of how this marginalization is done through popular public discourse and how SAHMs negotiate, shape, and uphold their choices on the face of these stigmas engaging with and contributing to the public discourse.

In an era when a woman can be anything being a SAHM either by choice or because of circumstances is somehow less acceptable or valid. For the following thesis, I argue that lived experience of SAHMs reiterates the age-old notion of mothering and family life as only a private and not a vital public-sphere concern, thereby marginalizing 10.4 million mothers. Staying home and engaging in “invisible and unpaid” labor has led this group of mothers to be out of public sight and somewhat voiceless. Thus, public discourse about SAHMs without significant input by SAHMs has resulted in a monolithic and static identity. Using standpoint analysis as the theoretical framework and textual analysis as the methodology, I have analyzed opinion pieces written by SAHMs, published on popular magazine portals, and on their blogs, through which they attempt to navigate this public depiction of themselves. The analysis shows that SAHMs’ engagement with public discourse about them can be categorized under three broad themes: overt prejudiced assumptions about SAHMs which are a part of the larger capitalist rhetoric, nuanced negative dismissive rhetoric against SAHMs, and lastly rhetoric of choice in relation to SAHMs.

2. Evolution of Stay-at-Home Mothers

This section will focus on how the concept of stay-at-home mother has evolved over time. Since SAHMs and working mothers are considered to be at the opposite ends of the motherhood continuum, thus, to gain a comprehensive understanding of this evolution it is imperative to understand the idea behind working mothers.

Stay-at-home mothering once was the traditional and only available option/choice of mothering for women. With time women have become much more visible in many other fields outside the family. Access to education and change in economy has led many women to opt for work for pay, and now there exists a large number of mothers who no longer fit in the traditional notion of motherhood.¹ Though with time things have changed and there now exists many conceptions of motherhood, working mother and stay-at-home mother remain as the two most popular concepts. SAHM, is still regarded to be one of the prevalent modes of mothering in the public discourse; however, with time SAHM as a concept has evolved to a large extent.

The Great Depression and the Second World War, both these major historical events shaped 1950s to be the decade of conformity and consumerism. The primary locus for both activities was the myth of the happy nuclear family, and the heart of that family was the “mom.” Moreover, both these activities required women to stay out of the workforce and thus women were convinced to embody the image of the “nuclear family”, the only valid route for women. During this decade women would become mothers was unquestioned; in addition, any other aspirations were deemed to be secondary and were restricted and dictated by their primary maternal role (Rosen). Thus, till 1950’s women who came of age were raised to fulfill the role of a mother and a wife and were trained to uphold the image (white, middle-class) of a happy nuclear family. Later in the 1960s, many women joined the labor force abandoning the fulfillment one was supposed to gain from being a mother and a wife. Ironic how this shift is once again characterized and driven by the image the society believed to be valid; the image of “two-income” families. Undoubtedly for some women working was a financial necessity but for others the work brought in the extra amount which enabled their families to enjoy consumer goods. However, participation in the workforce did not reduce the

¹According to “Employment characteristics of families—2020” 71% of all mothers in the US are either looking for work or are engaged in some kind of paid labor outside the home.

household responsibility for women. Thus, emerged the trend for women to work part time or take up low paid “pink-color” jobs with fewer benefits which allowed them to devote enough time to carry their household related responsibilities (Rosen; Roth). The above descriptions of the 1950s and 1960s confirms that choice related to education and occupation was a fairly new phenomenon for SAHMs with the centrality of maternity in their lives paired with limited opportunities in the public spheres.

The idea that mom is the heart of the family and that a woman’s primary role is that of a mother sets the background for me to discuss the concept of “intensive mothering” which has shaped the contemporary idea of being a SAHM. This ideology came to prominence in the ’80s and ’90s and is characterized by high sacrifice and material resources for children, and low leisure and time for mothers. And till date whether a mom is a good or a bad one is decided based on the parameters of intensive mothering.

Over the years studies done by feminist scholars (Douglas and Michaels; Hays; Hallstein; Herrera) have conclusively shown domesticated intensive mothering to be the cotemporary ideology of “good” mothering. In the year 1996 Sharon Hays first described the term intensive mothering. Intensive mothering has three key tenets. First, the primary, central caregivers of children must be women. As Hays argues: “there is an underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job. When the mother is unavailable, it is other women who should serve as temporary substitutes” (8). Second, intensive mothering requires mothers to lavish ample amounts of time and energy on their children. Indeed, Hays argues, intensive mothering is “construed as *child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” (8, italics in the text). Third, intensive mothering is rooted in logic that distinguishes mothering from professional paid work, which supports the notion that children and the work of mothering are completely outside the scope of market valuation because children are now considered innocent, pure, and “priceless”, deserving special treatment due to their special value within the private sphere of the family (122-129). Intensive mothering as a parenting ideology demands mothers to make childrearing the sole focus of life at the cost of their well-being and dreams. Thus, stay-at-home mothers who assume mothering as their primary social role engaging in intensive mothering are suggested to be the “ideal” mothers. This “ideal” image demands mothers not only to be omnipresent in the home setting, but they also are seen as constant mothers (especially because they are not engaging in income-earning

activities) placing them at one of the extreme ends of the constructed continuum of motherhood. The other extreme end is apparently occupied by the working mothers.

Working mothers are almost always depicted as the sub-group of mothers who are exactly opposite to what stay-at-home mothers are. The first distinction that is made among the two sub-group of mothers is apparent within the adjective phrases used to describe them. The adjective phrase “stay-at-home” assumes “at home” and “not working” because she prioritizes her family and children above earning income and career advancement. Whereas the adjective “working” is paired with the image of a woman who chose to make use of her potential to earn an income and advance her career over mothering. Regardless of the image “working” paints, mothers who work outside are expected to master both work and childrearing responsibilities, leaving them oscillating between conflicting ideas of the “ideal mother” and “ideal worker”. Labels like supermom and superwoman are used interchangeably to affirm the society’s primary expectation from a working mother. The expectation is rather straightforward: mothers will be “applauded” if they decide to work however their share of household and child related responsibilities will remain as their concern. Any problem be it related to work or family she has to solve it on her own without making a big deal out of it. In short, she can “have it all” or “do it all” but at her own risk. She will have to be the ideal mother and ideal worker simultaneously and should be wary of not letting the public sphere interfere with the private and vice versa. Thus, she must possess the quality of shifting between roles smoothly; she must work as if she does not have children and raise children as if she does not work. And if she ends up faltering in either of the two it is her who should be blamed. After all a working mother is a superwoman who needs no help and is capable of saving the day always. And if they “choose” one over the other—finding full time work incompatible with the way they want to parent their child or stay-at-home life impossible for financial, career or personal reasons—they are pitted against each other through what the media loves to call The Mommy Wars.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Over the years, the internet has become an indispensable component of our lives, and it is more so for mothers of all ages. In addition to general use, mothers use the internet regularly to interact with other mothers. Most find public discourse about mothers and mothering expressed online to be particularly helpful, and at times problematic while experiencing motherhood. Online public discourse is an inexpensive, swift, and user-friendly medium to reach a mass audience; such discourse has been in use to shape the meaning and expectations of good mothering for a long time now. Consequently, mothers too started to participate in online public discourse to construct, support, and challenge the prescribed notion of motherhood.

Opinion pieces written about mothers and by mothers represent a significant share of the public discourse about mothers, thus analyzing such narratives is a rational effort to gauge an understanding about mothers in general and sub-groups of mothers like SAHMs in particular. At this point, it should be noted that the definition of SAHM is culture specific; and for this paper, I am relying on the definition and description of a stay-at-home mother in the U.S.

This paper aims to enhance the existing scholarship of motherhood rhetoric through exploring how SAHMs react to blatant and subtle online public discourse used to devalue them. Thus, I have used opinion pieces (dated between 2010 and 2020) by and about SAHMs published on credible and popular news and magazine portals like The New York Times, The Atlantic, New York, The Guardian, Time. In addition, I have also referred to mom blogs, online support community for mothers like Mother.ly.

I have selected standpoint theory framework to ensure a better representation of the lived experiences of SAHMs. As the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* aptly puts, “the epistemic process whereby a standpoint emerges enables the occupants of that standpoint to gain an element of power and control over knowledge about their lives. In becoming occupants of a standpoint, they also become knowing subjects in their own right, rather than merely objects that are known by others.” Hence, narratives analyzed for this thesis are not only narrated by others (who may not be

SAHMs) but SAHMs themselves. Standpoint Theory, designed by Nancy Hartsock in the year 1983, focuses on marginalized voices to understand oppression and dominance, with the goal of “envisioning more just social practices” (Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism”). Standpoint Theory is able to focus on marginalized voices because the theory rests on the assumption that all people acquire knowledge through their unique experiences obtained by their social position (“The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism”), and thus considers an individual’s own perspectives to be the most valid source of information about issues experienced by that individual (Wood). In addition, I have chosen Textual Analysis as the methodology for this research since textual analysis as a method is appropriate to decipher the use of language applied in popular public discourse to invalidate the maternal figure called stay-at-home mom. *The Sage Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methodology* states textual analysis is a methodology that involves understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences. Since I am employing textual analysis as the methodology the opinion pieces used are the primary texts and scholarly works such as journal articles, conference presentations, textbooks or statistical data are the secondary texts used to support the analysis of the primary texts.

Closely reading the opinion pieces I realized that the prevalent public discourse about SAHMs actively propagates a convoluted picture of them. On the one hand SAHMs are cajoled to believe staying home is ideal and on the other hand they are made to doubt themselves through the use of stereotypes. Also, various positive sounding labels are employed to dictate what SAHMs can or cannot be. Moreover, most importantly, it is advertised that one can be a SAHM without any repercussion; however, such depiction of choice is far from reality. In the next section, I have discussed the paradoxes entailing SAHMs’ identity and how they engage with them under three broad themes: stay-at-home mom stereotypes, oppressive labels, and choice is a complicated concept for SAHMs.

4. Stay-at-Home Mom Stereotypes

This section discusses the familiar stereotypical perceptions the society holds concerning the stay-at-home mothers. In an article titled “30 Misconceptions About Life as a Stay-At-Home Mom”, published on her blog *The Millennial SAHM*, Kermilia compiled some common assumptions. These assumptions are related by SAHMs, and they reflect society’s general idea about them. She simply asked a group of SAHMs, “What’s the one thing that people assume about you simply because you’re a Stay-At-Home Mom?” Among the assumptions most common ones are: SAHMs are lazy, they have ample amount of time, they are not smart (otherwise they would have been a part of the workforce), and that they are not educated or are wasting their education since it is not earning any monetary returns.

4.1 SAHMs are lazy/idle/ and have plenty of free time

One of the moms who took part in Kermilia’s survey responded that, “The one thing people assume about me simply because I’m a Stay-At-Home Mom is that I have loads of idle time. I’m especially surprised when other moms assume this. As a SAHM there is always work to do. I’d like my children to know me as a diligent worker and caregiver so sitting idle is not an option.” Another mom related that people think “That I don’t have an education. I’m always asked “well you stay home.so, what happens when they’re older” – it never, ever fails. So, I reply “I’ll use the master’s degree I received while staying home with them and teach a whole bunch of little ones when they get older.” Yet another mom said, people around her does not understand why she is stressed, it must be because she is bored doing nothing all day. An added assumption is that the SAHMs have it very easy. Many moms reported that people around them assume it is easy being home all-day taking care of children, and that these moms should be grateful.

By assuming SAHMs are lazy, idle, and has it easy the society is measuring her work against superficial standards. Work done outside of the home produces tangible results and can be displayed in terms of a spreadsheet or a report; most of SAHMs’ work does not produce tangible or immediate results but is often assessed against the same standards of work done outside. Thus, the invisible nature of SAHMs’ work is labeled as doing nothing!

4.2 SAHMs are wasting their education

Assumptions like SAHMs are wasting their education, and that their work is not considered as a “real job” (since neither their degree nor their work is earning a monetary return) are reflective of capitalist values. The fact that the society ties educational degrees to monetary gains brings forth an appalling fact: when caring for children is your paying job, then it requires credentials; when caring for children is your job because you are a SAHM, then it does not require any expertise. But there’s also the added complexity that daycare workers get paid very little, so the work is still being undervalued, just in a different way.

Christy, Harvard graduate and a mother, related how she was criticized for her choice to stay home despite graduating from Harvard with honors. One of her critics accused her of squandering her education by choosing to become a SAHM, and opting to sort laundry instead of making a substantial contribution to the society. In addition, Christy was told no one needs a fancy degree to stay home and care for children. However, research shows otherwise; mother’s educational attainments have important consequences for children, as those whose mothers have limited education tend to experience lower levels of cognitive functioning, lower levels of socioemotional functioning, and lower levels of academic achievement than children with higher levels of mother’s education (McLoyd,184-205).

4.3 SAHMs are either privileged or poverty stricken

Another prevalent assumption is that SAHMS are either financially privileged or disadvantaged. One extreme view is that stay-at home mothers often employ nannies to take care of their children while they engage in recreational activities (shopping, gossiping, and staging cat fights). One of the moms in Kermilia’s piece expressed, “I’ve had people assume that I’m privileged just because I’m a SAHM mom. Of course, it IS a privilege to stay with my child, but it doesn’t mean that we don’t struggle and work really hard to make ends meet.” The other extreme view is that SAHMs are struggling financially. Some moms related that their neighbors think they cannot afford certain luxuries of life, for example designer clothes or expensive holidays, since the mother does not work consequently the family has to manage on a tight budget.

4.4 SAHM's work is not real work

Some more prejudices about SAHMs include: SAHMs are involved in work that is labor intensive, but their work is not equivalent to a “real job,” since their work does not earn a wage and their bills are paid by someone else. In Kermilia’s piece one mom stated, “I was told during an argument that “all you do is sit your — at home all day with your hand out for your husband’s money.” Another correspondence said, “Most people assume that I’m not motivated to work or that I never went to school. I have been told, “must be nice to be able to stay at home and count your husband’s money.” I have also been asked what I want to do with my life because why would I want to sit at home when I have 4 degrees.” This issue of whether SAHMs work qualifies as job or not stirred an extensive discussion among the SAHMs themselves. Some SAHMs would like to refer taking care of their children as a job, and some SAHMs find it super condescending to label caring for one’s children as a job, yet there are others who think work of a SAHM cannot be compared to a real job let alone be called one. Since in a real job there is a routine, and one works for a certain number of hours every day (mostly the 9-5 office hours) whereas SAHMs are supposed to be available 24/7 with no distinct lunch or bathroom breaks. Brandy Zadrozny, writer for the Daily Beast and a mother, passionately claims, “Full-time parenting is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week gig. No breaks—naps are for tidying—no vacations, no sick days, and no shortage of people wondering just what one does with all that time.”

Once one assumes the role of a SAHM, she must “prove” to be busy to keep up with society’s idea of productivity which is positively related to busyness. She constantly must make people around her realize she is laboring despite being at home and being unpaid. This constant pressure of explaining her choice is putting a lot SAHMs feel ashamed of their choices to begin with. Lisa Endlich Heffernan, being a SAHM expressed how much she dreads the question “what do you do?” in her article “‘What Do You Do?’: A Stay-at-Home-Mother’s Most Dreaded Question” published on The Atlantic in 2013. Heffernan explains her reply of “I take care of the children” is almost always followed by “yeah you do that but then what do you do? As in what does people pay you to do?” Such experiences conclude how the phrase “stay-at-home” is obscuring all the hard work that goes into being a full-time mother. Another layer of complication arises with being a SAHM is that one is assumed to always be available to volunteer. “I have work” is not an excuse available for the SAHMs.

In addition, the idea that going back to work is the solution to any problem related to being a SAHM is problematic. When a working woman complains about the various frustrations of workplace, it is hardly the case that society advises her to quit work. However, when it comes to a SAHM how very often the society feels and thinks going back to work is the ultimate solution to resolve all that she is going through. And this attitude can be attributed to Betty Friedan's assumption "break out of the housewife trap" is the solution to the ennui most SAHMs go through. Though Friedan's understanding helped many women to assign a name to their distress, her theory was not without flaw. She focused primarily on psychology and disregarded a deeper inquiry into the structural issues that precluded women from branching out of the home. In particular, she failed to acknowledge the unique problems faced by minority and poor women; in fact, she discussed the situation of white, middle-class women as if it was representative of all women. Another limitation of Friedan's analysis is that it did not address who would assume white women's domestic responsibilities if they redirected their energies toward developing themselves in the public sphere (hooks).

The above stereotypes related to finance raises two very important questions. Hiring a nanny to care for children while the mother engages in activities that do not concern the children, how is that bad mothering? Should not a mother have the right to use her money however she likes and care for the children in whatever way works best for her? Why is that a mother either must look after the children or busy herself with paid labor? Why cannot she be neither yet a good mother and a good worker? On the other hand, when designer clothes and expensive vacations become indicators of well-being and prosperity, when contentment is criticized and continuous consumerism is applauded, what does it say about the values of such a society? The answers lie in the simple equation: one's worth is equal to how extensively one is laboring in a capitalist society.

Overall, the explicit rhetoric used in the form of common assumptions to define SAHMs is acting as a strategy to weaken and disempower them. Such use of arguments is crafted to make them doubt their choice, practice intensive mothering more aggressively or consumerism to prove their worth (they are neither lazy nor idle) thereby taxing themselves psychologically, physically, and financially, and finally coerce them to engage in dismissing the experiences of other mothers in order to validate their choices and identity.

5. Trojan Labels

This segment focuses on how subtle dismissive rhetoric is used to invalidate the overall notion of being a SAHM. The arguments discussed here will reflect how behind the shadow of seemingly positive labels nuanced negative rhetoric is used to underplay the experiences of being a SAHM. Such rhetoric can be summed as either SAHMs “do nothing” because they “stay home” or are superheroes who “do everything effortlessly”. I will begin with discussing how the very label stay-at-home perpetually oppresses mothers who choose to stay back home to nurture their children.

5.1 Stay-at-Home

Stay-at-home as a label is often understood to be either a temporary fix or an extremely rigid permanent identity which many mothers find difficult to come to terms with. On the one hand, SAHMs are constantly being asked “when are they planning to go back to work? what are their plans once the children grow up?” implying there has to be more to being a SAHM. And on the other hand, if SAHMs are involved in some form of part-time work from home they are looked down upon as the second-class SAHMs. This is simply because they are “depriving” their children from undivided attention and also because they are not completely “true” to their choice. If a mother chooses to stay home, she must have a plan B and if she executes her plan B from the get-go of being a SAHM she will be criticized, thus leaving no “good choices” at her disposal.

Erin Almond, a novelist, expresses in her article “Why Do We Continue to Stigmatize Stay-At-Home Moms?” that she hesitates to admit that she is mostly (since she barely manages to write much with three children) a SAHM. It is “because that label makes me feel diminished, unimportant, perhaps even a betrayer of that wide-eyed dreamer who went off to California to get her MFA 10 years ago.” Erin’s account illustrates how mothers who are toiling so hard are internalizing such negative rhetoric and shying away from being the confident women/mothers they ought to be. The question then arises why a SAHM has to have a plan B? Why can’t the society simply assume like any other working person she too can retire? Or are we assuming being SAHM is identical to being retired? Why do we stigmatize her as second class SAHM if she chooses to do something in addition to taking care of the children whereas elevate the status of working mothers when they juggle both

work and childcare responsibilities? Who benefits from such discourse?

When many moms are falling victims to such negative rhetoric there are still many others who are breaking this identity stereotype through making use of technology's evolution. Such technological advancement allows modern women the empowerment of joining tradition with innovation. Millennial women can raise their babies and work at home, proving that women's purpose does not lie in one or the other. SAHMs can be breadwinners, too.

5.2 Supermom and Superwoman

The above problematic layer associated with the stay-at-home label sets up the background to discuss how seemingly positive labels like supermom and superwoman are used to complicate the modern notion of what it is to be a SAHM. Under literature review I have discussed how the labels superwoman and supermom are used synonymously to keep working mothers under the false impression of having to walk on eggshells because of their choice to work. The same can be said about a SAHMs but with an added layer of complication. When it comes to the label "superwoman" in the context of a SAHM, it implies a SAHM is a symbol of strength. To start off a SAHM does not have bad days and even if she does, she is tight-lipped about it since talking about hardship related to mothering is a sign of weakness and seeking help to alleviate such suffering is unnecessary. When in reality like all workers the SAHMs have their share of bad days, go through feelings of extreme despair, and requires adequate help and support to bounce back. In addition, she must never disclose regret over her choice or desire to go back to work, doing either she runs the risk of putting the entire SAHM population to shame.

Furthermore, in the context of SAHM the label supermom implies SAHMs are supposed to practice intensive mothering at a more exhaustive level. It takes a village to raise a child (African proverb), but we don't live in villages anymore. No single person can be an entire village, yet that is precisely what stay-at-home mothers are expected to be. They should be able to do everything related to child rearing at a level of perfection. They are not only expected to rear children but are often judged in terms of how clean their houses are, their cooking and baking expertise, and their appearance (they are expected to look presentable all the time). Aneesa Bodait, a freelance writer and former corporate lawyer, states a crucial "criterion" a SAHM has to fulfill, she should love and be great at cooking, cleaning and be an expert of all the domestic chores one can think of. The

article further suggests yet another defining aspect of what it is to be a SAHM; she is someone who not only stays home but loves doing so and is also great at all the domestic chores. This definition adds to dehumanizing the SAHM further.

5.3 Lucky

“Lucky” is another label often used to describe SAHMs. This positive sounding label is repeatedly used to make SAHMs feel that their struggles are less intense, they have chosen the easy route, they have their partner’s income to rely on, and they should be grateful (disregarding they too have the right to complain and vent). Many a times when SAHMs want to describe or discuss the difficult issues they face or the sacrifices they have made to be home, the conversation is cut short because they are “lucky”. It is assumed having the opportunity to stay back home makes one “lucky,” and there exists no need to dig deeper into their experiences.

Such arguments are often contested by SAHMs. Author of “Why I Cringe When People Tell Me I’m ‘Lucky’ to Be a Stay-at-Home Mom” goes on to explain how labelling SAHMs “lucky” does a disservice to all moms. They explain regardless of the location of the mother, be it home or outside, parenting is (hard)work and “We don’t tell people they’re lucky to be doctors or lawyers because we recognize those professions take a great deal of effort. Telling moms, they’re lucky to stay at home glosses over the amount of work they put in to raising children.” In addition, the author mentions how moms staying back home do not only benefit children but the male working partner as well. “He gets free childcare, comes home to a home-cooked dinner every (okay, most) nights, and always has someone available to take the children to their doctor’s appointments or do chores during the day so we have our nights and weekends for family time. He’s benefiting from this arrangement as much as anyone else in the house, but I’m the one who’s frequently told how lucky I am.” Thus, calling SAHMs “lucky” reinforces gender norms since the husband, or the male partner clearly benefits from having a stay-at-home wife without necessarily ascribing to gender norms.

“No, I am not ‘lucky’ to be a stay-at-home mom. Luck has nothing to do with it. Our ability to live as a single-income family took hard work and sacrifice.” Aileen Clark reveals in her article “Stop Telling me I am ‘lucky’ to be a Stay-at-Home Mom” the extensive sacrifices she and her family had to make and continue to make are completely overshadowed by the label “lucky”.

Rebecca West having the experience of being both working and stay-at-home mom explains

how “The grass on each side, is both sh** brown and vibrant green.” She relates while she was a working mom, she often thought SAHMs are lucky to not have to dress up or commute for long hours every day for work or have a definite routine making everything feel chore like. On the flip side she is now the SAHM “who thinks that a working mom is also really lucky! I miss the independence, the pride I felt in my ability to “do it all” and strangely enough, the routine!”

Considering the discussion on different labels used to describe SAHMs it is very much apparent that these labels in all honesty are used to repress them similar to the way they are used to suppress the working mothers. Though SAHMs are trying very hard to establish their unique identity in today’s world, the fact remains that labels like *stay-at-home*, *superwoman*, *supermom* and *lucky* on the surface may seem to be harmless are leaving mothers insecure, empty (identity crisis), tired, and desperate to feel more human again.

6. Choice: a Complicated Concept for SAHMs

Every expecting mother faces the daunting decision of whether to go back to work full-time or to stay at home and make mothering her primary social role. The society will make a mother-to-be believe that she has the freedom to choose between full-time work and full-time mothering. However, the reality is very different. This section explores the concept of choice in the context of SAHMs.

True that some mothers have the space/freedom to choose to assume the role of a stay-at-home mother, but their choice is not above criticism. On the other hand, mothers who are forced to choose to stay home their choices cannot escape criticism either. Closer inspection suggests that such criticisms are crafted to validate blaming mothers' choice or lack thereof for any difficulties they face which in turn echoes that any or all choice to be bad for mothers.

6.1 Finance

Firstly, the economic condition in the US is such that both partners are required to work to maintain a certain living standard. Data indicates the US economy has changed over the years significantly and requires both the parents to engage in paid labor force to uphold a certain living standard. 2015 survey conducted by Pew Research Center indicates that the two-parent households where both the parents work has increased to 46% compared to 31% in the 1970. The same survey indicates households where both parents work full time about 26% parents say their spouses or partners earn almost the same amount of money and 22% say the mother makes more. Though not majority but for 48% of the two-income households cannot afford to let the mom stay back home and if they do it will only translate into a drastic and adverse effect on the financial standing of the families. Erin Barsness, working mom, relates she had to work after having a child since she earned half of the income. Though she believes mothers should do what is best for them and their family, but she emphasizes that most mothers do not actually get to decide (Barsness).

Furthermore, not all mothers have a partner to share financial responsibilities with, thus

single mothers are another category of mothers who do not have the option to choose. According to US Census Bureau 2020, 80% of the single parent families are headed by single mothers. At any given point, about two thirds of single mothers are working outside the home, a slightly greater share than the share of married mothers who are also working outside the home. On the other hand, once a baby arrives many women are forced to disengage from the labor force primarily for two reasons: very expensive childcare and employers believe it is difficult for mothers to manage work and childcare responsibilities with equal efficiency. Data shows both these reasons to be true. In a 2014 article, Pew Research Centre claims that research by the US Census Bureau reported that in terms of inflation-adjusted dollars, average weekly childcare expenses for families with working mothers who paid for childcare (24% of all such families) rose more than 70% from 1985 (\$87) to 2011 (\$148). (Desilver) According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey mentions 60% of all working mothers reported having some level of difficulty balancing between work and family responsibilities. Thus, with the given scenario mothers who choose to stay back home are not necessarily choosing but are making a decision of convenience. As Darlene Cunha stated that at the age of 27 years she *had to decide* to stay at home. With two babies, under two-year, it would have cost her family more than twice as much in childcare as what she would bring home. The exorbitant childcare cost coupled with the odd hours and unset schedule deterred her from accepting the available offers. Thus, to survive financially Darlene took the sensible decision of staying back home.

6.2 Social and Biological Factors

So far, I have discussed how finance can make choice a rather murky concept for mothers. To add we have biological and social factors which contribute heavily to making choice complex for mothers. Though the existing knowledge has some gaps, strong scientific evidence has demonstrated that the quantity and quality of a woman's eggs do diminish over time. Fertility declines with age in both men and women, but the effects of age are much greater in women. In their 30s, women are about half as fertile as they are in their early 20s, and women's chance of conception declines significantly after age 35 (Practice Committee Of The American Society For Reproductive Medicine In Collaboration With The Society For Reproductive Endocrinology And Infertility). Thus, by default women must take breaks from their planned career path to have children. When it comes to fertility issue it is worth pondering how often do we get to hear men being concerned about their

“biological clock” . . . the vast public discourse on fertility fails to discuss male fertility and how with age the sperm quality declines just like the female eggs. And when some discussion is held the phrase “male biological clock” is used to hint not all men need to be worried and also “biological clock” is mostly a female thing. Women and men are found to experience fertility problems at roughly equal rates; data suggests about 9% of men and about 11% of women of reproductive age in the United States have experienced fertility problems (Infertility and Impaired Fecundity in the United States, 1982-2010: Data from the National Survey of Family Growth) However, most of the available public discourse on fertility brings forth infertility as a female only problem.

Maira mentions our assumption seems to be that reproduction is a female responsibility first and foremost. Anything going wrong with it must be a woman’s fault. The role of the biological clock has been to make it seem only natural – indeed inevitable – that the burdens of reproducing the world fall almost entirely on women (Weigel).

Deciding to take a break to have a baby may once again seem like a choice for women but, many women are forced to take this break otherwise it will be too late, and they will end up having no baby of their own. And above all it is women who are constantly stalked by the social pressure of being responsible for the monumental responsibility of reproduction. Many mothers regret being mothers (they do not regret the children per se but the strictures of motherhood); they either had children because of the peer pressure or because the husband wanted them. It is somewhat possible for women to ignore the peer pressure however when marriage is at stake it is a completely different scenario. Amy (mother of a 5-year-old) related she never wanted children but her husband did. . . and being non-compliant would have meant a divorce (Kingston).

Moving forward, it is the woman who goes through tremendous physical changes while expecting a baby and is prone to take paid or unpaid leave when compared to the male partner involved. Thus, it is the mother’s productivity that takes a back seat. According to 2015 Pew Research Center Survey adults who have ever worked fully 42% of mothers say they have reduced their work hours in order to care for a child or other family member. This compares with 28% of fathers. The same study states moms are more likely to say parenting interferes with career advancement. Precisely every 4 out of 10 working mothers, that is 41% of all working mothers, find it difficult to balance work and parental responsibilities.

Another societal expectation which makes choice difficult for mothers is regardless of whether a woman is working outside or not the majority share of childcare and household responsibilities are

hers. Often, we find the father or the male partner missing in the morning picture of feeding children breakfast, preparing their lunch, getting them ready to be handed over to childcare or dropping them at school. Again, during dinner time we see the mother taking the lead in preparing the dinner, helping with homework, and putting child/children to bed. 2015 Pew Research Center Survey states most households with both parents working share household responsibilities equally whereas 54% of married or cohabiting parents say the mother does more than the father when it comes to managing the children's schedules and activities. Another major aspect of childcare responsibility is to tend to emergencies. In times of crisis be it a simple one like a child down with fever or a severe one like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the mother who is expected to step in and take care of the emergency/crisis. Pew Research Center Survey conducted in 2015 states when it comes to taking care of sick children, 55% of married or cohabiting parents say the mother does more than the father.

To summarize choice is a murky notion for SAHMs; if they choose to stay home, they are criticized and if they stay home out of necessity, they are not treated any better. But the irony is this necessity is largely a constructed one: "We learned that, yes, we can venture outside of this societal box of mother and homemaker, but our culture does not invite it, does not make it easy for us, and does not make it worth our very valuable time and effort. So, we stay home. Not necessarily because we want to stay home, but because we would rather do this than all the groundwork it takes to do that, only to be told over and over again that we're still not good enough" (Cunha). Keeping all the layers of complication in mind if a mother chooses to stay-at-home and assumes being a mother as her primary social role her choice is brutally criticized. On the one hand, the society urges her to choose what is best for her and her family, and on the other hand marginalizes her based on her choice. We have seen in an earlier section how blatant prejudiced assumptions are used to demean SAHMs. And this section of rhetoric of choice in relation to stay-at-home mothers revealed how the various systems come together to circumscribe SAHMs abilities to exercise choice. Thus, existence of choice for SAHMs is just an illusion.

7. Conclusion

For a very long time, stay-at-home mothering was the only route available for mothers, and intensive mothering the only ideology of parenting. Currently, the popular belief is that with time situation has improved and mothers can now choose between different types of mothering and adhere to a parenting ideology that best suits their need. Undoubtedly this common belief is true for many mothers but not for *all*, especially the SAHMs of today.

Careful analysis of the prevailing public discourse around SAHMs conclude that there exist major discrepancies between the portrayal of this sub-group of mothers and their lived experiences. Above all, the analysis reveals a constant effort to dismiss stay-at-home mothering predominantly through putting them on the spot to defend their choice. The consequence being SAHMs are constantly fighting the stereotypes, investing every ounce of their being to defy the identity imposed on them, and are engaging in public discourse to prove choice to be an illusion for mothers and especially for SAHMs. Lastly, the analysis also hints at how the distinction between “working” mothers and “stay-at-home” mothers is a constructed phenomenon and not representative of the reality. Both the categories of mothers are fighting similar battles related to stereotypes, imposed identity and constant need to justify their choices. True when mothers decide to engage in full time mothering undoubtedly there is a sense of ennui that some of these mothers feel. However, the themes I have discussed in my paper are adding to the stereotypical images of stay-at-home mothers and helping the society as a whole to disdain the efforts that goes into rearing children. As Erin Almond aptly puts, “Look: There’s no job less prestigious than raising children. The pay is terrible. The work is incessant and can often fairly be called “drudgery.” And the external rewards, such as economic power and intellectual respect, are nil. Yet it’s one of the most valuable jobs in the world.”

The purpose of this thesis was to analyze narratives surrounding stay-at-home mothers using the lens of standpoint analysis to gauge an understanding of the kind of work the existing public discourse is doing and how the SAHMs engage with such public discourse thereof. The analysis indicates public discourse about SAHMs without significant input by SAHMs has resulted in a monolithic and static identity for them. It also shows SAHMs’ engagement with public discourse about this imposed identity can be categorized under three broad themes: overt prejudiced assump-

tions about SAHMs which are a part of the larger capitalist rhetoric, nuanced negative dismissive rhetoric against SAHMs, and lastly rhetoric of choice in relation to SAHMs. This outcome of this thesis will help considering changes in public policies to accommodate and validate SAHMs.

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