



## Article

# Achieving Gender Equality through Paid and Unpaid Work: An Exploration of Mothers' Perspectives on Work

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**Abstract:** The prevailing understanding of work as paid work is reflected in political efforts to achieve gender equality, which include emphasising that women, like men, should increasingly pursue paid work. This exploratory research aims to question whether this idea to align female with male life patterns is conducive to gender equality and to promote new insights based on mothers' experiences. Our analysis is based on guided interviews with eight Swiss mothers in part-time employment who have at least one child aged three or older, and a working partner in the same household. The interviews show that these mothers do not share the expectation that all mothers should take on the main responsibility for domestic and care work, nor the expectation that all women should be doing full-time paid work. They would like to see greater acceptance and appreciation of different forms of work. This research concludes that gender justice can be understood as a freedom of choice that includes both the right to be doing paid work and the right to have time for domestic and care work—for men and women. Gender equality efforts do not have to be restricted to one form of work, but can leave room for different types of work and the appreciation of them.

**Keywords:** paid work; unpaid work; domestic work; care work; gender equality; feminism; motherhood; mothers



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## 1. Introduction

Work contributes significantly to the structuring of our society and establishes an order in which people are rewarded and valued differently (Hirsch 2016, pp. 7, 59). From this perspective, work creates “a hierarchical order of classes, professions and genders” (Hirsch 2016, p. 7). This function of work as a structural feature of our society plays an important role in the situation of mothers—in particular in combination with the distinction between paid and unpaid work.

This exploratory research is intended to question whether women's acceptance of paid work standards is conducive to gender equality and to promote new insights based on the experiences of mothers. Specifically, this research focuses on mothers' conceptualisation of work and motherhood and creates a space for women's views in relation to the standards of work and motherhood they encounter in their environment.

### 1.1. Work and Motherhood as Society Structuring Factors

As work is a major structuring factor in our society, gender equality depends heavily on our understanding of work. As the literature shows, work has an enormously high value in our capitalist society, but only insofar as this concept is equated with paid work (Madörin 2010a, p. 98; Hirsch 2016, pp. 7, 13, 20, 66). Other activities, such as unpaid domestic and care work done mostly by women, could correspond to this concept. However, these activities are either not recognised as work or at least are not referred to as such in

everyday language (Bock 1977; Bock and Duden 1977). This understanding of work as paid work is also reflected in political efforts to achieve gender equality which focus on the argument that women, like men, should increasingly pursue paid work (cf. Duden 2009, p. 26; Crompton and Lyonette 2006, pp. 379–80). However, the norm of the loving and self-sacrificing mother still prevails and, accordingly, women bear the main responsibility for domestic and care work. Therefore, mothers are confronted with contradictory standards in relation to work and motherhood (Baumgarten et al. 2017; Duden 2009; Habermas 2000; Leahy and Doughney 2006, p. 40; Crompton and Lyonette 2006, p. 380). Gender equality efforts that focus solely on the fair distribution of paid work are criticised by some gender researchers because they neglect that women have to cope with the multiple burdens of paid work and care work (Crompton and Lyonette 2006, p. 380; Leahy and Doughney 2006, pp. 37, 40).<sup>1</sup> Hence, various authors plead for questioning the prevailing norm of full-time employment and for redefining the term work (Leahy and Doughney 2006; Seidl and Zahrnt 2019; Senghaas-Knobloch 1998, 2001; Baatz et al. 2004; Fischer 2008; Auth et al. 2015).

In large parts of the scientific literature, too, work has mainly been equated with paid work and the perspective of mothers on the subject has often been excluded (Hirsch 2016; Bock 1977). Even feminist research that includes unpaid work and mothers' experiences focuses on the compatibility of family and work. The term work keeps being limited to paid work by using the term family (or life) to distinguish unpaid work from (real) work, e.g., in studies on work–life balance (Crompton and Lyonette 2006; Wattis et al. 2013; Hampson 2008). In such studies, unpaid work is mostly seen as an obstacle that prevents women from doing paid work like men. In these studies, too, equality is thus seen as an alignment of female with male working patterns.

While previous research on how mothers deal with societal norms regarding work and motherhood has focused either on paid work or on the compatibility of paid work and family, this exploratory study focuses on mothers' own understandings of work and how they perceive and deal with the prevailing understanding of work that clashes with the standards of motherhood. Do the interviewed mothers also equate work with paid work? To what extent do they perceive the standards of work and motherhood and how do they position themselves in relation to these? This research explores the extent to which these women, as privileged working mothers embedded in a Western and capitalist culture, share or question these standards. It is important to note that there is a relevant debate in gender research which arose based on the preference theory. Developed by the sociologist Hakim in the late 1990s, this theory states that the labour market behaviour of women in Western societies is mainly determined by individual attitudes and preferences (Hakim 1998, 2000, 2003). Arguments questioning this theory emphasise the complexity of individual decision-making, and the importance of individual, household and structural constraints in forming decisions (Yerkes 2013, p. 9; cf. Crompton and Lyonette 2005; Leahy and Doughney 2006; Procter and Padfield 1999).

As Yerkes (2013, p. 9) states, understanding the complex relationships between preferences and constraints is important from a scientific standpoint. Nevertheless, this research does not aim at exploring the interviewed mothers' labour market behaviour, their decisions related to their own work life (e.g., why did they choose to do paid work or how did they decide on their work load) nor at understanding their decision processes. Additionally, we do not assume that the mothers' attitudes are based—as Hakim (1998, 2000) would state—simply on an individual level, as we are aware that they are influenced by social structures and norms. Instead, we put an emphasis on one of the factors that influences Western society's approach to work and gender equality and that is often missed out in research: the understanding of work.

## 1.2. Literature Review

### 1.2.1. Separation of Paid and Unpaid Work and Gender Inequality

The emergence of a bourgeois capitalist society in the 18th century contributed to a clear distinction between paid work and domestic work (Bock and Duden 1977, p. 125),

in which paid work was more valuable than domestic unpaid work. This hierarchy, associated with the distinction between private and public spheres, led to the emergence of gender-related work, reinforcing work-related gender gaps (Jurcyk 2008, pp. 69–70; Wehner et al. 2010, pp. 299–302; Wehner 2012, p. 54).

Until recently, the term work was used only for the sphere of paid work (Duden 2009, p. 16). From the end of the 18th century, domestic work was “defined as a manifestation of love” and “regarded as the essence of women, the nature of the female sex, and treated accordingly”, in contrast to men’s paid work outside the home (Bock and Duden 1977, p. 151; Duden 2009, pp. 16, 20). Even today, unpaid work is often not considered work and the term work is still equated with paid work (Madörin 2010a, p. 98; Hirsch 2016, p. 13): Work means “to work in a paid job, to earn money, to work for pay (‘Do you work?’ ‘No, I am a stay-at-home mother.’)” (Bock and Duden 1977, p. 120).

### 1.2.2. The Glorification of Paid Work and the Devaluation of Unpaid Work

The tendency to equate work with mainly paid work is not as reasonable as it seems at first glance. For example, in the case of Switzerland, according to the economist Mascha Madörin, most of the work done in the country is unpaid (Madörin 2010a, p. 98). More hours are spent unpaid on caring for people in Switzerland than on all paid work (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> As described in a study by the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), the volume of unpaid work in Switzerland in 2004 amounted to just under 8500 million hours, while that of paid work amounted to just under 7000 million hours (Swissinfo.ch 2009; Madörin 2010b, p. 94). This means that around 20 per cent more unpaid work than paid work is being done (Swissinfo.ch 2009). In addition, according to Madörin’s calculations, the gross value added by unpaid work in Switzerland accounts for over 60 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Madörin 2010b, p. 94). She argues that the household sector is even more economically significant than the service sector (ibid.). Thus, if there is a greater volume of unpaid work than paid work, then, according to Hirsch, we should question which type of work “is considered more valuable and ‘normal’” (Hirsch 2016, pp. 140–41). From this perspective, the definition of work is a political construct, involving the distinction between paid and unpaid work, as well as the difference in their social valuation (Hirsch 2016, p. 133). According to Hirsch, this distinction is not necessary and we should question whether we as a society wish to make this distinction or not (ibid.).

The “glorification of paid work”, as Hirsch calls it, plays an important role in the situation of mothers working in paid jobs (ibid., p. 46). According to Hirsch, people find the justification for their existence through paid work: it is only as a result of having paid work (no matter what kind) that they become a “necessary” part of society (ibid., p. 66). The prevailing understanding of work in our society, thus, leads to people who do not engage in paid work being considered “redundant” and superfluous (ibid., p. 20). Hirsch argues that our societal understanding of work defines justice in such a way that all those who engage in paid work receive what they are entitled to, both in material terms and in terms of social recognition (ibid.). The standard of working in paid jobs that now not only applies to men but also to women has led to a specific approach to achieving gender equality (Hirsch 2016, p. 17).

### 1.2.3. Male Standards of Work and the Demand for Equality through Paid Work

Gender relations and domestic work have been examined in the course of feminist research in recent decades. Accordingly, the gendered division of labour has been questioned with regard to the new norms of equality (Hirsch 2016, p. 133). Despite these efforts, equality is still considered a “women’s issue”, which leads to it being synonymous with the alignment of female life patterns with male ones (ibid.). In feminist discourse, the demand has developed (for good reasons) that women should have a guaranteed path to paid work and thus to financial independence (cf. Beauvoir [1949] 1999; Woolf [1929] 2020; Maihofer 2013, p. 30; Fraser 1996). Virginia Woolf argued that women should have their own fixed income in order to achieve independence (cf. Woolf [1929] 2020). She herself

received the income on which she based this insight through inheritance and not paid work (ibid.). However, since paid work was the only way for most women to obtain a fixed income, the demand for their own income through paid work was established. Thus, gender equality is to be achieved by increasing the paid work done by women (Hirsch 2016, p. 158). This feminist approach argues that domestic and care work, which is still mostly done by women, is an “insufficiently recognised and remunerated form of work” (Hirsch 2016, p. 154; cf. Huber 2006, p. 22). Women must “adopt the dominant male way of life of continuous full-time employment” in order to be free and independent and to avoid the risk of impoverishment<sup>3</sup>, lack of independence and lack of social recognition (Hirsch 2016, p. 154).

The demand for women’s paid work is related to a central insight of the women’s movement, namely that women are socially discriminated against because they are the wrong sex, i.e., because they are women and not men (Maihofer 2013, p. 30). To counter discrimination, it was argued that “women have the same abilities as men” and consequently “should be treated in the same way” (Maihofer 2013, p. 30; cf. Fraser 1996). As shown in Maihofer’s analysis of 1997, economic structures were “shaped by ‘male’ ideas” of what work is (Maihofer 1997, p. 351). Women had to “adapt to the dominant ‘male’ ways of thinking, feeling and acting” in order to have social equality (ibid.). Their own views, competencies and values were “largely considered irrelevant” (ibid.). Even today, the majority of female ways of life that are not centred on paid work appear to be “deficient” in comparison to male paid work-centred ones (Hirsch 2016, p. 139; Maihofer 1997, p. 364). Male values and ways of life are thereby adopted uncritically: Women should finally be able to be the way men have always been (Maihofer 2013, p. 30). This means that women have to accept male values and work the same way as men do (cf. Beauvoir [1949] 1999).

However, there is “sharp disagreement” within the feminist debate on the fundamental question of whether “increasing the volume of female paid work as such really represents progress in gender equality” (Hirsch 2016, p. 159). According to Hirsch, such an approach ignores that male-dominated standards still determine what is considered “normal” and valuable work, or what is considered work at all (ibid.). Through paid work and the resulting autonomy, women have overcome a large part of the distance that lay between them and the male sex, but are “only halfway” to real equality (cf. Beauvoir [1949] 1999). According to some authors, an alignment of female life plans with those of men cannot be a (final) solution to the problem of equality (cf. Hirsch 2016; Beauvoir [1949] 1999). Being economically independent like a man does not mean that a woman is in the same position as him (cf. Beauvoir [1949] 1999). Although the norm of paid work also affects women’s lifestyles in the course of achieving gender equality, it encounters further factors that differ from those of male life realities.

#### 1.2.4. The Implicit Dual Role of Women and the Structural Disadvantages of Working Mothers

Women are required to take on a dual role (Hirsch 2016, p. 145): They are not only expected to align themselves with men in their work behaviour and also work in paid jobs but also to retain primary responsibility for the household, children and care of the elderly (McRobbie 2010, p. 118; Menke 2019, pp. 129–30). The traditional expectation “that women take primary responsibility at home” is not being challenged (McRobbie 2010, p. 118). Especially after the birth of the first child, a “retraditionalisation” of the family arrangement often takes place (Maihofer 2014, p. 328): “Thus, women usually continue to bear the main burden and the overall responsibility also lies with them as a rule, even in the case of equal division of tasks. Moreover, they usually do the bulk of the unpaid work if they do not delegate it to other women” (Maihofer 2014, p. 328; cf. König 2012). Instead of an egalitarian division of labour between the sexes, women are “heroine-like”, trying to “do it all” (McRobbie 2010, p. 118). The tasks and burdens of the working woman multiply as she does everything the men do and all the traditional women do (cf. Beauvoir [1949] 1999; Rossanda 1997, p. 17).

According to Madörin, it is obvious for many families that the woman will reduce her paid work, as she often earns less than the man (Madörin 2010a, p. 103).<sup>4</sup>

Women's primary responsibility for the household and family is thus tacitly assumed and merely overlaid with the new norm of equality (Hirsch 2016, p. 139). The norm that presupposes that women are primarily responsible for childcare implies that serious and committed workers have neither the main responsibility nor shared responsibility for childcare (Moller Okin 1989, p. 5). This assumption hides that the availability of men in the labour market was only made possible by the gendered division of labour (Hirsch 2016, p. 139). Little attention is paid to the fact that the norm of full-time paid work was only possible because it only applied to men, and that it was the unpaid work of women that made this norm feasible (ibid., p. 17): Their unpaid work ensured the reproduction of the male workforce (Menke 2019, p. 53). To a certain extent, the norm of full-time paid work is still based on the old assumption that men who are doing paid work have wives at home who are taking care of the unpaid work (Moller Okin 1989, p. 5). If the norm of full-time paid work is now extended to the female share of the population, women's previous contribution to the functioning of this gainful economic system—unpaid work—will simply be forgotten (Hirsch 2016, p. 133).

According to Hirsch, full-time employment can thus be "defined as a new social norm for all" (i.e., both men and women), although many (in particular mothers) cannot fulfil this norm (ibid.). If the gender-specific division of labour is not replaced by the new norm of equality, but merely overlaid with it, mothers have the same rights as men—"but they are constitutively disadvantaged in the exercising of these rights" (ibid., p. 40). Hirsch formulates this as follows: "In the current gender regime, women are no longer excluded in principle from the male-dominated world but are included in it as the structurally disadvantaged" (ibid.).

In sum, this exploratory research argues that women who are mothers and do paid work find themselves in a field of tension between paid and unpaid work and between conflicting expectations that arise from the coexistence of different norms: the norm of the good mother, who has the main responsibility for domestic and care work at home, and the norm of the hard-working woman, who should do paid work in order to achieve equality and independence.

## 2. Methods

In this study, individual guided interviews were conducted with eight mothers who did both paid and unpaid work. Interviews were conducted using Kaufmann's (1996) method of the comprehensive interview, which involves engaging with and understanding the interviewees' perspectives. The transcribed interviews were evaluated using Helfferich's (2011) qualitative analysis, focusing on the comprehensive interview. In this exploratory research, working mothers living in a privileged socioeconomic context in Switzerland were asked about their views on the topic of work, what standards of work and motherhood they encountered in their environment and how they positioned themselves in relation to these. This research focuses on understanding the representations of privileged women embedded in a Western and capitalist culture and explores the extent to which these women, as working mothers, share or question these standards.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of eight<sup>5</sup> mothers living in Switzerland and doing paid work. In accordance with Kaufmann's recommendation to avoid using demographics as inclusion criteria (Kaufmann 1999, p. 61) and to use criteria relevant to the research question, this research followed three selection criteria that are important in order to answer the research question: (1) the mother must be in part-time employment so that she experiences the combination of paid and unpaid work in her daily life; (2) she must have at least one child aged three or older so that she already has some experience as a mother; (3) she must have a working partner who lives in the same household. The eight interviewed women all

worked in part-time employment in different professions (researcher, equal opportunities officer, optician, project manager, doctor, teacher, lawyer, early childhood teacher), with at least one child aged three or older, and were living with a working partner in the same household, and were between 31 and 47 years old.

The sample was homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic background: all mothers were middle class and living in Switzerland. With regard to educational qualifications, six women had a university degree and two had basic vocational training.

It is important to acknowledge that this sample is not intended to be representative (Kaufmann 1999, p. 61) and the data resulting from the interviews are not intended to be generalised to the whole population (Helffferich 2011, p. 174).

## 2.2. Procedures

Recruitment took the form of convenience sampling, beginning with a sample of participants known to the researcher. They subsequently recommended further participants (snowball sampling). Participants were contacted by phone or email. All mothers were given the information that the topic of the interview would be “mothers and work”, i.e., mothers’ views on the topic of work and what standards in relation to motherhood and work they encounter in their environment. All invited mothers read an informed consent ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality prior to the interview and gave their consent to participate and to record the interview. In the course of the interview, the interviewer asked questions on topics related to everyday life and the definition of work, evaluation of the mothers’ own work situation, and societal standards in relation to work and motherhood (the standards they encountered in their environments and their own opinions and views on the subject). To frame the interviews within the participants’ social context (Helffferich 2011, p. 78), at the end of each interview, the mothers were asked about their and their partner’s age, occupation, education, workload and income (see Table S1).

The average duration of the interview was one and a half hours, and the interviews took place in the mothers’ homes ( $n = 5$ ), at the mothers’ paid workplace ( $n = 2$ ) or at a café ( $n = 1$ ), depending on the mothers’ choice. The interviews were transcribed in full in German.

This research was exempt from approval of the Ethics Committee of the researcher’s institution, e.g., because there were no health-related data gathered in the research process and no risk for participants. Data were processed according to the data safety guidelines of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

## 2.3. Instrument

This research is based on exploratory qualitative analysis focusing on the examination of the themes found in the mothers’ interviews. The interview guide (cf. Appendix A) and the conduction were based on the comprehensive interview by Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1999) which focuses on engaging with the interviewee’s way of thinking: “The comprehensive approach is based on the conviction that people [ . . . ] are active producers of the social [and] as such have important knowledge that needs to be explored from the inside, namely about the value system of individuals” (Kaufmann 1999, p. 34). In a further step, the sociological task of the researcher is to “interpret and explain on the basis of the data collected” (ibid.). Understanding the person represents a tool for this (ibid.). Based on this method, the first phase of research procedures consisted of reading the relevant literature, which raised the following initial hypotheses: (1) there are different forms of work; (2) working mothers perform two or more forms of work; (3) working mothers encounter different standards and expectations in their environment with regard to work and motherhood; (4) working mothers perceive all these aspects (different forms of work, standards, etc.), reflect on them, deal with them in their everyday life in a specific way and form their own opinion about them. These initial hypotheses guided the formulation of the semi-structured interview guide (cf. Appendix A) and the direction of the research.

Arguing that knowledge comes from subjective everyday experiences, Helffferich aims to conduct qualitative interviews with an awareness of interview processes, a great

capacity for reflection on the part of the interviewers and a basic attitude of openness (Helfferich 2011, p. 17). To meet Helfferich's (2011) approach, the interviewer assumed an attitude of openness about the mothers' understanding of work. To illustrate, the beginning of the interview started with the question "What kind of work do you do in a typical working week?", which would be followed by "What does work mean to you?". This prevented the interviewer from imposing a distinction between paid and unpaid work at the beginning of the interview, but first paying attention to how the interviewees define work and divide the different activities.

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded using software for qualitative data analysis (Atlas.ti). As a first step, excerpts from the interviews were coded into three broad themes according to the research questions: (1) the criteria to define what work is; (2) the social environment's standards in relation to work and motherhood and mothers' attitudes towards them; (3) mother's wishes for their working lives (s. Table 1). These first-level codes consisted of open and broad themes that functioned as umbrella concepts to conduct the subsequent more detailed coding and analysis.

Moreover, to avoid using the researcher's interpretation schemes and their designations, the second-level codes definition were close to the mothers' formulations of their own narratives e.g., the terms "Superwoman" or "Cleaning lady"). After the first two coding steps, the second-level codes were grouped into sub-themes reflecting the reconstruction of recurring patterns of experiences, ideas, and attitudes (Helfferich 2011, p. 173), as described in Table 1. According to Helfferich (ibid.), this research does not aim at a generalisable distribution of statements but at a presentation of mothers' perspectives, in which statements are summarised, connected or compared with each other so that commonalities, differences and contradictions become visible.

**Table 1.** The coding scheme of the study includes themes as umbrella concepts, the codes found in mothers' interviews, and the sub-themes, which were found as patterns of common experiences.

Themes (Umbrella Concepts)	Codes (Concepts of Mothers' Narratives)	Sub-Themes (Patterns of Experiences)
Criteria to define work	Joy Heteronomy Self-determination	Joy External determination vs. Self-determination
	Pay	Pay
	Liberation Self-realisation Recognition	Liberation, Self-realisation and Recognition
	Professionalism Expertise	Professionalism and Expertise
Environment standards in relation to work and motherhood	Superwoman Bad mother Daycare centers Dealing with expectations Demarcation	Clashing standards of work and motherhood
	Paid work Education Money	Should a mother be doing paid work or not?
	Full-time or high workload Part-time Father vs. Mother	What is a "good" workload?
	Domestic work Childcare Unpaid work Wages for domestic work Maternity leave	How do the mothers perceived domestic work?
	Stay-at-home mothers	How are stay-at-home mothers thought of?

Table 1. Cont.

Themes (Umbrella Concepts)	Codes (Concepts of Mothers' Narratives)	Sub-Themes (Patterns of Experiences)
Mothers' wishes for their working lives	Different household division of labour Shorter working hours Cleaning lady Lower workload for the husband Part-time work easier Compatibility	Create space for paid and unpaid work
	More flexible child care Freedom Equality Help from the partner More money More realistic image of parenthood Structures Delivery service Less pay inequality	Enable families to make decisions free from economic coercion
	More money for the care sector Social appreciation Wage for housework To make unpaid work visible	Valuing unpaid work
	Time as a whole family Time for housework Time for yourself Time with children Time with partner Longer maternity leave More holidays Paternity leave To be able to be at home	More time for domestic work and the family or for themselves
	Valuing motherhood Listen to mothers	Listen to mothers

### 3. Findings

While the literature shows that unpaid work is often not considered work and the term work is still equated with paid work, we found that the interviewed mothers have a much more complex and diverse understanding of work. Analysis of the interviews shows that the activities that the mothers carried out in the context of paid work and in their household and family were perceived by them as work to different degrees. This suggests that the interviewed mothers' understanding of work was complex and calls for more in-depth analysis. This study explores how women's representations of work are shaped by the standards and norms associated with the context of the capitalist white privilege of Western culture that women encounter in their environments of paid work, unpaid work and motherhood. It is argued that this understanding is essential in order to know what working mothers wish for in the integration of work and motherhood and ultimately, to achieve new standards of equality.

The themes, sub-themes and example quotes are displayed in Table 2 and described in the following chapters. The themes were derived from the research question and correspond to the first-level codes described in Table 1 (s. Section 2.4). The sub-themes were derived by grouping the second-level codes into recurring topics and patterns. The mothers' statements that were most conclusive to answer the research questions are discussed and reported below.

**Table 2.** The themes (umbrella concepts), the sub-themes (patterns of mothers' experiences) found in the interviews, and the mothers' quotes used to illustrate each sub-theme.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
3.1. Criteria to determine what is work from the mothers' perspective	Joy	<p>"On the other hand, cooking, cleaning, shopping, tidying up, that's what I would call work, because I just don't like doing it, I've never liked doing it and that's not going to change (laughs)." (Y)</p> <p>"I don't find cooking and baking to be work. That's something that brings me a lot of joy." (S)</p>
	External determination vs. self-determination	"Well, I would also consider work as something externally determined. So if I wasn't working now, I would think about what I wanted to do. So that means I wouldn't be in the office and I wouldn't be with the children." (J)
	Pay	<p>"If you earn money for it, it is already work, it is paid work, something is asked of you, you don't have all the freedom you want, you have to do what they say." (Y)</p> <p>"I also enjoy my work incredibly much, but first and foremost it's about the money, about earning something." (K)</p>
	Liberation, self-realisation and recognition	"But I have to say that even with children there are days when not everything is just nice, but I think it's precisely because I can go to work in between that I look forward to this everyday life again, where at the end of the day you don't somehow get a thank you or praise or some kind of recognition (laughs), but something . . . yes, something else . . . a different kind of fulfilled day." (M)
	Professionalism and expertise	"For me, the office is the place where I am competent. [ . . . ] I'm much overchallenged at home, simply with situations, because there's always something new and I don't know what the right thing is, and then I have to decide something [ . . . ] and I don't have that in the office. I feel much more competent in the office than at home." (J)
3.2. Standards in relation to work and motherhood	3.2.1. Clashing standards of work and motherhood	"A good mother is one who works as if she did not have children and looks after her children as if she did not work." (R)
	3.2.2. Should a mother be doing paid work or not?	<p>"So the job where you earn money has a much higher status in society. [ . . . ] Well, I think there are two kinds of work, one is work where you earn money, as much as possible, the more you earn, the better the work. [ . . . ] And the other one, voluntary work or doing something for which you don't earn any money, it's either smiled at or you hear 'You are such a good person for doing this'." (C)</p> <p>"I'm the only one [in the family] who went to university. And I think they thought it [her education] was expensive enough, it will be okay if she continues to go to the office." (J)</p>
	3.2.3. What is a "good" workload?	<p>"I don't feel it is desirable at all to work full-time, I really don't." (R)</p> <p>"It is very different, some find 60 per cent [ . . . ] incredibly much and others find it little." (R)</p>
	3.2.4. How do the mothers perceive domestic work?	"My friends and I and many other women do not feel the need to be relieved of this work, they would like to have more time and space for this work." (D)
	3.2.5. How are stay-at-home mothers thought of?	<p>"I couldn't imagine that, after one day I would go crazy if I was only at home, I would find that so so boring." (S)</p> <p>"I think it's basically nice when a woman can stand on her own two feet, because you never know how it will turn out, so . . . But I don't condemn anyone who does it this way or that way, I think everything has its justification." (M)</p>

Table 2. Cont.

Themes	Sub-Themes	Example Quotes
3.3. Mothers' wishes: What do the working mothers want?	Space for paid and unpaid work	"And for me it's not so much about absolutes, because I like to do everything. For me it would be about creating space to be able to do it side by side." (R)
	Family decisions free from economic coercion	"Who gets paternity leave paid by their employer, almost no one. The progress or the change in thinking is simply not there yet, it's still like that, everything stays with the mother somehow. [ . . . ] I would like to see it shared more like that, for both of them. That both have a right to stay at home or that the company doesn't make it so difficult for the men, maybe." (K)
	Valuing unpaid work	"You pay so much money as you have to take care of everything [family, children], that has been your private decision, but that children are needed for a society for a pension fund or a future, that it's actually still good for everyone if there are a few children here in Switzerland. I think that's missing a bit, that it serves everyone and is not just an expensive hobby for a few people who find it fun to have a few children." (Y)
	More time for domestic work and the family or for themselves	"I think I would work less myself, and the hours I do work, I would work more with the children. Doing less paid work doesn't mean filling up all the hours with the children, but I would also like to have a bit of free time [ . . . ] there has to be room for that. So more free time, more time, more working time with the children, without less money, actually I need even more money." (D)
	Listen to mothers	"I would like mothers to be listened to and for them to be taken seriously." (R)

### 3.1. Criteria to Determine What Is Work from the Mothers' Perspective

There was consensus that there was a distinction between paid work and work at home. However, while some mothers referred to both domestic and care work as work, others excluded certain aspects of childcare and certain household activities from their understanding of work.

Four mothers included both domestic work, such as household activities, and care work, including care, relationship activities and emotional work, in their definition of work (J; D; R; C)<sup>6</sup>. Three mothers distinguished between paid work and domestic work but excluded both the time they spent with the children and some of their domestic activities from their definition of work (K; M; Y). For example, one of the mothers listed both domestic and paid work as work but did not perceive cooking and baking as work (S). Gardening was also not considered work by the two mothers who did it (R, M). Some of the mothers only perceived certain aspects of childcare as work, e.g., buying children's clothes (S). For one of the mothers, playing with the children or going out with them was neither real work nor real leisure time (Y). One of the mothers did not explicitly refer to childcare as work, but at one point in the interview, put the activities she carried out at home with the children on the same level as the work her husband did in his paid work (K).

The interviews show that for the mothers, very different criteria could be decisive in determining whether they perceived an activity as work or not.

Joy: Joy (or interest) was important to all mothers in some form of their work—be it paid work, voluntary work or care work, but the way this criterion was used by the interviewed mothers varied depending on the work context (unpaid or paid work). When it came to domestic work, the mothers were more concerned with doing what was necessary and with "feeling good" at home. Unpaid work was thus often described as work by the mothers if they did not like doing it or found it exhausting. Accordingly, some of the mothers did not perceive childcare as work because of the joy it brought them. In the case of paid work, however, it did not stand in the way of defining it as work if it was associated with joy (Y). On the contrary, joy was even important in defining paid work as work and

played a role in the mother identifying with her job. For example, for one of the mothers, paid work was work because she enjoyed it, while domestic work was work because she did not enjoy it, and childcare was not work for her because she enjoyed it (K).

External determination vs. self-determination: Some of the mothers defined work as something that was determined by others. Interestingly, some included childcare as externally determined work, while others did not. One of the mothers, for example, defined childcare as work and distinguished it from leisure time, as she did with paid work, because in her understanding, childcare was “*basically determined by others*” (J):

*“I would also consider work as something determined by others. So, if I wasn’t working now, I would think about what I wanted to do. And that means I wouldn’t be in the office and I wouldn’t be with the children”* (J).

Pay: Payment for their work was weighted differently by the different mothers. While for some it was in the foreground, for others it played a rather subordinate role: Although salary was one of the reasons why one of the mothers did paid work, it was of secondary importance to her (S): if the work was interesting, she also accepted a loss of salary for it (S). Another mother’s priorities were the other way round: she enjoyed her paid work “*incredibly much*”, but “*first and foremost it’s about the money*” (K). Three of the mothers defined paid work as work they did mainly because they got money for it (Y, K, D). For example, it was important to one of them that she earned enough so that she did not “*have to worry and can pay all the bills*” (D). She brought in an interesting definition of work, namely, that something was work for her as soon as it could also be outsourced and paid for (D). To another mother, it was important that she earned her own money with her paid work and did not have to ask her husband for money if she wanted to buy something (C). Nevertheless, she emphasised that she did not go to work primarily to earn money, but because she enjoyed it (C). In her opinion, money is given too much weight in our society. For her, it was “*secondary*” (C):

*“Money is important so that I can live, that I can be healthy, but otherwise . . . ”* (C).

Liberation, self-realisation and recognition: Paid work was often associated with self-realisation, liberation and recognition by the interviewed mothers. However, one of the mothers said it was a lie that all women’s paid work is about self-realisation (R). Even though it must be emphasised that not all women are concerned with self-realisation in their paid work, the interviewed mothers valued recognition and self-realisation in their work—whether unpaid or paid. While for one mother, the meaningfulness of her work seemed to be central, for another, her salary was more important. Additionally, although paid work, with the money it brought in, had liberating aspects for some of the mothers, self-realisation did not only come from paid work. Family or voluntary work could also offer them fulfilment.

Professionalism and expertise: From the mothers’ perspective, the demand for professionalism or expertise also contributed to defining an activity as work, when compared with domestic work or childcare. Three mothers felt that they were either more competent in their paid work or that a higher level of professionalism was required of them than in childcare at home (K, C, J). The higher demand for professionalism was justified by the pay or the qualification (e.g., as a childcare worker). One of the mothers was of the opinion that love should not be separated from professionalism in paid care work. In care homes for the elderly, for example, it made a difference whether the old people were showered or simply hosed down, whether “*you take time for a person and take the relationship aspect of this work seriously*” (D).

These criteria were not applied uniformly by the mothers to all activities but were weighted differently for each task and combined with each other. Even the coordination of the different forms of work with their different logics and requirements was perceived by many mothers as a major work effort. This showed, on the one hand, that work could not be reduced to paid work in the mothers’ understanding, and, at the same time, how complex and diverse work was from the mothers’ perspective.

### 3.2. Standards in Relation to Work and Motherhood

Even if the interviewed mothers' views on the topic of work and motherhood were sometimes very different, their views and the standards they encountered in their environment confirm that almost all female life plans have a negative connotation of some kind: Mothers in such contexts either work too little and are old-fashioned, "behind the time" housewives, or they work too much and are bad mothers.

#### 3.2.1. Clashing Standards of Work and Motherhood

The analysis of the interviews shows a clear and consensual acknowledgement that the interviewed mothers encountered clashing standards in relation to work and motherhood. For example, a mother quoted a saying from a feminist mothers' movement in Germany:

*"A good mother is one who works as if she did not have children and looks after her children as if she did not work"* (R).

This is congruent with the example of another mother who lost her annual bonus because she stayed at home when her children were sick (Y). This was interpreted at work as insufficient commitment:

*"The expectation from your workplace is that you are completely available, no matter what is happening at home"* (Y).

In addition, some of the mothers found that the work they did at home was often invisible to those around them. The time they spent on unpaid work was often even considered leisure time by their colleagues at work.<sup>7</sup>

For one mother, problems arose when the children were sick—problems that, in her opinion, male work colleagues did not have (J). In this situation, she found it difficult to cancel meetings at work (J). Most fathers would have a partner at home to take care of the child, either a stay-at-home mother or a mother who was employed at 40 or 50 per cent (J). Another mother noted that in the private sphere, there is often the expectation that it is the mother, not the father, who stays at home with the sick child (M).

The analysis of the mothers' experiences shows that the incompatibility of the different forms of work results from these clashing standards: Some of the mothers stated that their paid work was not compatible with their unpaid work, that they were always stressed out and could not do enough at home or in their paid work. One mother, for example, thought about whether it had been a mistake to stay employed after the birth of the children (Y):

*"Everyday life is often quite stressful. So every morning is a rush, every morning you find you haven't slept enough, you have to rush to drop the children off somewhere, you have to go to work and have to get something done quickly, then you're off again"* (Y).

*"Both of us struggle just to get something or the minimum that we want from life, and stress ourselves out every day going to work. And you only do the minimum because you don't have the energy to do more, at home either"* (Y).

She had become a little "disillusioned" (Y):

*"What I couldn't have imagined is how little time you have for everything. [ . . . ] that there isn't enough time for anything"* (Y).

#### 3.2.2. Should a Mother Be Doing Paid Work or Not?

The incompatibility experienced by mothers leads to the question of whether a mother should do paid work. When considering whether a woman should continue with her paid work after the birth of her children, the interviewed mothers encountered different opinions in their environments. Two of the mothers saw it as the expectation of society that the mother would stay at home with the children. While one mother's partner had to justify why he was at home two days a week, she had to justify why she was working in a paid job (M). However, the other mothers instead encountered the expectation in their environment that the mother must be doing paid work. For example, one interviewed mother (J) was the only person in her family who went to university and (in the eyes of

her family) this expensive education required her to stay in her paid job after the birth of her children (J). Two of the mothers noted that they even received admiration for their jobs (D, S), and one of them was admired for her profession as a doctor, a profession highly valued by society (S). Another mother commented that society considered paid work to be more important than unpaid work.

*“The more you earn, the better [more highly valued] your work is”* (C).

One mother commented that in Switzerland the aim was *“for as many people as possible to go to work”* (M). In her opinion, this was reflected in the fact that daycare places were subsidised and could be deducted from taxes, while her own set-up, in which the parents covered childcare themselves, was not supported (M).

Like the opinions in their environments, the mothers’ own opinions about themselves (or other mothers) doing paid work also differed: For many of the interviewed mothers it was always clear that they would stay in their paid jobs after the birth of their children. Only two mothers had to do paid work for financial reasons and felt that paid work was more of a constraint (D, R). Even though the other women partly referred to the financial incentives, they put this into perspective that for them it was more about enabling the desired standard of living than securing their existence (J, K).<sup>8</sup>

Overall, it is noticeable that paid work was very important to some of the mothers interviewed and that they enjoyed it. Two of the mothers emphasised that they were satisfied with their paid work and argued for a model in which mothers would contribute about the same amount to the family income as fathers (J, S). However, it is important to note, as one mother emphasised, that the fact that she had an exciting job and had always been able to do what interested her was a *“huge privilege”* that many women did not have (D).

The interviewed mothers were generally very happy to do paid work, but one of them regretted a little that she had not stopped her paid work after the birth of her children (Y). She had thought that it would be difficult to take up paid work afterwards and therefore, decided against giving it up (Y). In retrospect, however, she would perhaps no longer choose paid work (Y). She could not have imagined what it *“really”* meant to have children and had always imagined the coexistence of paid and unpaid work to be much easier and less stressful than it actually was (Y).

### 3.2.3. What Is a “Good” Workload?

None of the mothers could imagine themselves working full-time unless it was really economically necessary. Most of them reasoned this by saying that they wanted to spend time with their children and did not want to send them to daycare 100 per cent of the time or that the overall workload would be too high. The alternative of their partner reducing the workload or staying at home completely was either not considered by the mothers or would be out of the question for them (except for one (S)). Most of the interviewed mothers seemed to question the male ideal of full-time employment and did not want to adopt it for themselves.

The time spent doing paid work was a key variable in the interviewed mothers’ discourse about paid work and motherhood (activities with the children). There was a high level of complexity and a lack of consensus in the perspectives of the mothers (and their environment) regarding what was a heavy or light workload. The opinions of the mothers (and those of their respective environments) ranged from *“mothers should definitely not reduce their workload”* to *“each family should do it the way it suits them”* to *“the woman should reduce her workload”* and *“it is a great privilege if she can do that”*.

One mother acknowledged this diversity:

*“It is very different, some find 60 percent [ . . . ] incredibly much and others find it little”* (R).

The expectations encountered in the environment regarding their workload did not only differ between the mothers, but also within each mother’s environment, depending on

whether they were in a professional or private environment. One mother whose family was dependent on her income criticised the discussions about mothers' workloads (R). In her opinion, they were misogynistic because they were never about "*what mothers actually need*" and mothers were "*never asked 'why did you decide that way?'*" (R). In her opinion, however, there were good reasons and no woman decided on a life plan just like that (R). Instead, "*various factors like structural, i.e., social conditions*" were decisive (R):

*"So you live in a society and you have to deal with the given conditions and [ . . . ] you don't have the option of deciding against these conditions, [ . . . ] and that's what annoys me about the discourse, that they always act as if there are choices. The choices are incredibly limited."* (R).

This mother also emphasised that she was very privileged to even be able to ask herself the question of what kind of workload she would like (R).

The interviews show that in the discussions about mother's workloads, people seem to focus on two contrasting main topics: Either the well-being of the children, without considering the possible financial consequences for the mother, or the shortage of skilled workers, while the needs of the mother and her family are not decisive. In addition, they sometimes leave men out of the picture and discuss mothers' paid work and care responsibilities in isolation from those of men. Moreover, the interviews show that the large amount of unpaid domestic and care work done by women working part-time often remains hidden in such discussions.

#### 3.2.4. How Do the Mothers Perceive Domestic Work?

According to the interviewed mothers, domestic work is a job, one that should not be underestimated, that is necessary and that some of the mothers could gladly do without. However, as shown by some of the interviews, relieving mothers of domestic and care work does not seem to be a solution for all: Even though some of the interviewed mothers could gladly do without the domestic work, two of the mothers emphasised that domestic and care work is not per se a chore that all women would like to be freed from (R, D). One mother stated:

*"My friends and I and many other women do not feel the need to be relieved of this work, they would like to have more time and space for this work"* (D).

They did not have the experience that people told them that they had "*to bake a good plum cake*" or that what they did for a living was not important because they would be having children anyway (D). In contrast to the generation of the 1970s, who still had these experiences, their generation "*has had a completely different experience, that it is quite natural that we are successful professionally*" (D). The needs that arise from this new situation are quite different:

*"I would like to do this [domestic] work or some of it and I want the conditions that make this possible without me then being poor because of it"* (D).

She emphasised that she did not want to go back to where women used to be. Women are now in a different situation and have different experiences and it is necessary to look much more closely at "*what the problem actually is today, instead of recycling the old recipes*" (D). Moreover, she emphasised that she could only do her job with an 80 per cent workload because her children could go to a day school where the women who worked there earned half or a third of what she earned (D). She found this "*an insanely unsatisfactory situation*" (D).

Another mother considered only the time pressure under which the domestic work had to be done as a burden (R). Domestic and care work were important to her because she knew that as a working mother, she made an important contribution, with both her paid and unpaid work, to the economy and society. She referred to childcare and domestic work as "*work for society*", for everyone's quality of life (R). Everyone is in need of care and support at some point in their lives, either as a child or an elderly person (R). Our society would "*not function at all*" without this work, because we need someone who "*makes food and cleans and washes clothes*", otherwise we could not be doing paid work (R). In sum, many

of the mothers expressed the wish that domestic and care work be made more visible in society, i.e., be recognised as (valuable) work.

### 3.2.5. How Are Stay-at-Home Mothers Thought of?

Associated with the discussion on the impact of domestic work, we found the concept of being a stay-at-home mother. While one mother noted the expectation of society that the mother stays at home with the children (K), some of the other mothers encountered in their environments the expectation that the mother must be doing paid work. They observed that mothers who withdrew from the labour force met with little understanding in their social environment and felt they were no longer worth anything. According to these observed experiences, the interviewed mothers noted that stay-at-home mothers were often confronted with the question of whether they were bored. Interestingly, they valued stay-at-home mothers differently. One mother had the impression that she would be a less good mother as a stay-at-home mother (J). Three mothers suspected that they would be bored if they were at home with their children all the time (C, J, S). Two mothers already considered themselves to some extent as housewives<sup>9</sup> (because they stayed at home part-time), but had trouble with the term, as did a third mother, because it sounded devaluing (K, M, C). They identified more with their paid work. Two mothers, on the other hand, described themselves as housewives, although they were doing paid work (D, R). They wanted to show solidarity with housewives and make unpaid work visible. There was only one mother who, looking back, would have liked to be a (full-time) stay-at-home mother for a while after the birth of her children (Y). However, one other mother would have wanted to have longer maternity leave (of at least one year) (D).

In addition, most of the mothers wanted to show solidarity with stay-at-home mothers and emphasised that it was acceptable if a woman wanted to be a stay-at-home mother.

### 3.3. Mothers' Wishes: What Do the Working Mothers Want in Their Cultural Context of Western Privilege?

The mothers often emphasised in the interviews that each family should choose the work and family model that suits them. From the diversity of the mothers' wishes for their working lives, we found five common desires: (a) to create space for paid and unpaid work; (b) to enable families to make decisions free from economic coercion; (c) to value unpaid work; (d) to have more time for domestic work and the family or for themselves; (e) to listen to mothers. The most important thing, as several of the mothers noted, is that decisions are truly voluntary and not a result of (economic) coercion. Parents should, therefore, be financially enabled to take over childcare themselves.

The concern that gender inequalities are perpetuated by mothers' choices should not prevent women from being taken seriously in their choices, even if they want to be stay-at-home mothers, and not labelled as unemancipated, as one of the mothers emphasised (D). In her opinion, instead of describing the decision of housewives as unemancipated, the necessary socio-political changes are needed to enable real freedom of choice for parents. She warned against playing career women and housewives off against each other and argued that both have a hard time and cannot really please anyone. She said that the conditions under which women have to make good decisions and create good situations for themselves and their families are difficult (D).

None of the mothers wished for a heavier workload in their paid job or greater financial independence from their partner, but almost all of them wanted more time for domestic work and the family (R, D, C, K, M, Y). One of the mothers wanted to spend more time at home and reduce her working hours in return—both for herself and her husband and for society as a whole (R): The total amount of work that two parents do in a week is on average 70 h each, i.e., 10 h each per day, and that “*is just an incredible amount of work*” (R). It is important to reduce this burden by reducing working hours (R). Another mother also thought that working hours should be “*massively reduced*” (D). These are “*insanely*” high in Switzerland (D).<sup>10</sup> She herself wanted very much to do less paid work and invest the hours

in working with the children, to have a “*balance a bit more in favour of having time for home*”, to bring more order into the household and to have more energy and time to deal with the problems and worries of her children (D). One of the mothers noted that the discussion was sometimes very absolute, either you are a stay-at-home mother or you are doing paid work (R).

*“And for me it’s not so much about either-or, because I like to do everything. For me it would be about creating space to be able to do it side by side”* (R).

#### 4. Discussion

The present exploratory research is aimed at understanding the interviewed mothers’ perspectives and their experience of different forms of work and societal standards with regard to work and motherhood. Moreover, it asks the question: How do working mothers, in a context of privilege in Switzerland, position themselves amidst the conflicting standards and views they encounter in their environments? Ultimately, this research aims to ask the mothers directly: What do you want?

##### 4.1. The Adoption of the Male Model as a Source of Inequality

One theme that was salient in the interviews was the discrepancy between the expectations towards women and men as workers and parents. As Menke notes, “care conflicts in the life course” are actually “less understood as shared problems of both parents, but (more) often as those of the woman or mother” (Menke 2019, p. 255). While the “activation of women and mothers for the labour market” is promoted politically, the “activation of fathers to take on more care work” is somewhat neglected (ibid., pp. 57, 256, 276). Hence, the gender division of labour is not such that men take on significantly more unpaid work (Huber 2006, p. 22). Correspondingly, mothers emphasised the expectation that the mother and not the father should stay at home with the child. This expectation, which seems to exist in society outside the workplace, is diametrically opposed to the expectation of the work environment. These contradictory expectations can be explained by two basic assumptions that are often made: that mothers are primarily responsible for childcare and that good workers do not have childcare responsibilities (Moller Okin 1989, p. 5). Since working mothers embedded in Western culture fall under both the first and second assumptions, they are confronted with these conflicting expectations. The old assumption that workers have wives at home who take care of everything still implicitly exists—working mothers simultaneously occupy the position of both the fully available worker and the wife who takes care of everything at home (ibid.).

This view of the mothers is in line with Hirsch’s assumption that mothers are at a disadvantage if they try to establish equality by adopting men’s work and life model unchanged (i.e., spending at least eight hours a day at the workplace) since the domestic and care work will remain in their hands (Hirsch 2016, pp. 40, 140; cf. Fraser 1996). In addition, the fact that most of the interviewed mothers would like to have more time for domestic or care work and that some of them emphasised that they do not consider full-time paid work as desirable or even perceive paid work as a constraint is an interesting contrast to Hirsch’s finding that wage dependency is often interpreted as individual independence (Hirsch 2016, p. 158).<sup>11</sup> This would be an interesting subject for future research.

In the interviewed mothers’ views, the adoption of male standards also impacts the social value of their paid work as well as their unpaid work. Paid work is considered a “prerequisite for full participation in society”, while all other forms of work—including unpaid work—appear deficient in the face of this norm (Sondermann et al. 2009, p. 167). Accordingly, it is not enough for mothers to perform exclusively unpaid work; only paid work—even if it is only part-time—gives them social legitimacy. Hence, mothers who withdraw from the labour force can experience social devaluation. Consequently, stay-at-home mothers are expected by others to be understimulated. This corresponds to Duden’s statement that those who do domestic work “no longer want to admit it [ . . . ] so as not to be ridiculed as little housewives” (Duden 2009, p. 18). This view is not shared by the

interviewed mothers. In their understanding, work can be defined much more broadly and diversely. Furthermore, it becomes clear that especially unpaid domestic and care work is of great importance to mothers and to a society based on capitalism. The mothers' understanding of work is deemed important, because—according to Maihofer—women can only be truly equal when they can bring in their own ideas about work (Maihofer 1997, p. 351).

#### 4.2. *The Need for the Coexistence of Work and Family Models*

The analysis of the interviews shows that, in a context of Western white privilege, neither the expectation that mothers should take on the main responsibility for the domestic and care work nor the expectation that women, like men, should be in full-time employment for as long as possible match with the interviewed mothers' perspectives. Above all, in these cultural circumstances, the demand for mothers to do paid work in a full-time regime is often in stark contrast to the interviewed mothers' needs. As can be seen in the interviews, the mothers seem to question the paid work standards. For the most part, they are very happy to be doing paid work, but do not wish to work full-time in their paid jobs if it is not absolutely necessary from an economic point of view.

More paid work or greater financial independence from their partner does not seem to be a priority for all the interviewed mothers. However, time for themselves, their family or domestic work is. As already emphasised, this concerns a small proportion of mothers who can afford to shift their priorities away from their financial income and whose jobs and employers allow them to reduce their workload. For these mothers, however, it is important to be able to question society's standards and expectations and to find ways and lifestyles that meet their needs and the opportunities provided by society. Neither uniform standards oriented towards professional success nor those oriented towards an idealisation of femininity or motherhood lead to an equality that accepts differences and values them in the form of equal rights (Prengel 1997, p. 125). Maihofer considers it crucial to develop "a way of thinking that makes it possible to recognise different standards and thus different human ways of life as 'equal'" and "to let them coexist" (Maihofer 1997, pp. 359–60). The need of the interviewed mothers to allow different work and family models to coexist is frequently mentioned in the interviews. Gender justice does not have to be reduced to an independent livelihood for the individual (cf. Schutter and Zerle-Elsässer 2012). As is also repeatedly shown in the interviews, gender justice can be understood as a freedom of choice that includes both the right to spare time for care "and the right not to do care work" (Menke 2019, pp. 82–83; cf. Knijn and Kremer 1997, p. 334; Hammer and Österle 2003, p. 41).

A new understanding of work is not formed in theory or research, but in social practice (Kurz-Scherf 2004, p. 15). The task of labour research, however, is to detect "the potential contained in the working and living practice of women and men" to shape work equally and to develop a model for the future of work from this (ibid.). Accordingly, this exploratory research contributes to the examination of how the concept of work was perceived, reflected upon and questioned by the interviewed working mothers. By being limited to a sample of eight mothers, the homogeneity of the sample (e.g., Swiss, white, middle-class with a good education, heterosexual cis women) means that the scope of the findings is limited and cannot be applied to all working mothers (Helfferich 2011, p. 174). The interviewed mothers are in a privileged position, which enables them to ask themselves questions that go beyond basic human needs such as food or housing. This gives them more freedom of choice when compared with mothers in less privileged conditions. Questions about the desired workload, for example, can be described as luxury questions, which many people cannot ask themselves because they are financially dependent on a full-time workload, for example, because of their migration status, or because their employer does not allow a lower workload. However, due to this apparent freedom experienced by middle-class Swiss mothers as cis women, they are particularly exposed to the expectations of their environment (e.g., as a mother, to reduce their workload after the birth of children). In addition, their privileged situation also put them in a position that facilitates the active

questioning of the given structures and gives them creative freedom that can take the form of emancipatory potential. They can move in a direction that can ultimately also serve as a goal to improve the lives of less privileged women (and men).

## 5. Conclusions

Since work plays a particularly important role in the structuring of our society, gender equality depends very much on our understanding of work. Work has an enormously high value in our society, but only as long as this concept is equated with paid work. According to this equation, our society is structured and divided into successful and unsuccessful people, rich and poor people and important and superfluous people.

The prevailing understanding of work, which is focused on paid work, influences the living and working situation of mothers, as it implicitly underlies gender equality efforts (e.g., [Yerkes 2013](#); [Crompton and Lyonette 2005](#)). However, if gender equality efforts are based on the understanding of work that prevails in our society and that is limited to one form of work, we need to reconsider whether these efforts are worthwhile. The results of this research lead to the question as to whether the wholesale adoption of paid work-centred standards by women is conducive to gender equality and raises the argument that gender equality efforts should not be restricted to one form of work but should leave room for different types of work and their appreciation. In this paper, equating work and paid work is questioned and it is pointed out that work can be defined in a broad and diverse way, as it was understood by the interviewed mothers and that unpaid domestic and care work in particular are of great importance in our society.

The interviewed mothers feel the need to allow different standards and different work and family models to coexist and be recognised as being of equal value. This is clear in the way they deal with the expectations placed on them and their views on the standards by which they are judged as working mothers. However, it is also evident in their different models of life and work and their individual and complex concepts of work. A complex pattern of different attitudes towards the standards of their environment results from shared and varying experiences and views ([König 2012](#), pp. 91–92).<sup>12</sup> The mothers are by no means in agreement on many points, set different priorities, have different expectations of themselves and other mothers and have different goals and needs. What has been postulated by some authors (cf. [Gerhard et al. 1997](#)) for some time now—namely that equality is based on the recognition of different but equally valid life plans—thus also corresponds to the diverse and different wishes, needs and views of the interviewed mothers. This paper argues that not only structural constraints, but also conceptual frameworks such as the understanding of work that is deeply embedded in the structures of Western societies, play an important role in the forming of experiences and views of mothers. It advocates for taking into account and broadening the concept of work when discussing gender equality. Specifically, a new gender norm that comprehends gender equality as an alignment of female to male work patterns might become just another constraint limiting women (and men) in their choices. Thus, it is essential to consider the influence that our understanding of work has on our understanding of equality. In an attempt to bring together the research literature and the different views and experiences of the interviewed mothers, we conclude that gender justice can be understood as a freedom of choice that includes both the right to be doing paid work and the right to have time for domestic and care work—for both men and women. In other words, gender equality efforts do not have to be restricted to one form of work, but can leave room for different types of work and their appreciation.

## 6. Future Research

This exploratory research has raised interesting questions that need to be addressed in further studies focusing on how mothers from different societal positions (or even different population groups) perceive work and related standards. For a fundamentally

revised concept of work, much more research is needed that looks at the topic of work from different perspectives.

In regard to the debate on women's preferences, in future research, it would be important to include the question of choice on the topic of work and motherhood since that was left unclear in this research. On the one hand, our results show that some of the interviewed mothers would like to have more time for their family and unpaid work, which seems to be aligned with a perspective of gender equality that integrates mothers' wishes. On the other hand, these results could also be read as a result of the structural constraints and could even be said to be reproducing old gender norms rather than questioning the alignment of female to male work patterns. Indeed, the interviewed mothers were not asked about their decision process, leaving unclear whether women preferred to work part-time to other possible scenarios. However, it is noteworthy that the literature on women's preferences arose as a critique of Hakim's theory, with its "key idea of the 'heterogeneity of women' centring on the distinction between those who are 'family oriented' and those who are 'career oriented'" (Procter and Padfield 1999, p. 152), a distinction we do not support in this research. Hakim's theory, in suggesting essentialism, implies that mothers comply with the established (male) standards of paid work and of motherhood. This assumption does not validate women's judgments and experiences regarding the disadvantages of choosing motherhood as it creates a feeling of determinism that ultimately prevents change. On the contrary, we would argue that the understanding of work that prevails in Western, capitalist societies and that is strongly centred on paid work is one of the complex factors in forming mothers' views and decisions, a factor that Hakim neglects. Thus, we argue that women do not have the conditions to have a free choice, nor are their attitudes only formed on an individual level. We propose an additional focus on one (socially influenced) factor that plays a role in the standards that the interviewed mothers are facing in their environment and in how they deal with them: the understanding of work.

A further necessary step in research would be to explore the perspective of mothers with a lower household income and a lower educational level, migrant women, mothers working full-time in a paid job and working poor or very wealthy mothers on the topic of work and motherhood, what standards they encounter in their environments and how they deal with expectations in this regard. We also consider it important to ask women who do not do paid work (stay-at-home mothers) about their experiences and views on the topic of work and motherhood, since research and political efforts tend to overlook their perspectives on the topic of work. In conclusion, like Maihofer, the authors of this paper hold the view that women can only be truly equal when they can bring in their own ideas of work (Maihofer 1997, p. 351). According to this, it is essential to include the understanding of work in research about women and work, because it is of great importance when it comes to society's approach to work and motherhood. We emphasise the importance of analysing the intertwining role that values, norms and social structures play in forming attitudes about unpaid and paid work when it comes to gender equality.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci12040218/s1>, Table S1: Sociodemographic information of the interviewed mothers.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Data will be available upon request to the corresponding author.

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## Appendix A

### Attachment

#### Interview guide: "Mothers and Work"

##### Introductory question

Q0. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your family?

##### Introduction: Everyday life and definition of work

Q1. What kind of work do you do in a typical working week?

- Ask if not mentioned:
  - Are there any other activities you do that you would describe as work?

Q2. What does work mean to you?

- Ask if not mentioned:
  - Do you also perceive activities for which you are not paid as work? Why (not)?

Q3. What arrangement/family model do you and your partner have today?

- Ask if not mentioned:
  - How did you come to be doing paid work?
  - To what extent did your environment (i.e., your partner, friends, work colleagues, family etc.) play a role in this decision (e.g., influence by their opinions or family models)?
  - How did your arrangement/family model evolve (e.g., as the children got older)?

Q4. How important are the different activities to you?

- Ask if not mentioned:
  - What is important to you in relation to work (money, time, meaning, etc.)? Why?
  - What value do you place on activities for which you are not paid?

##### Evaluation of one's own work situation

Q5. How satisfied/dissatisfied are you with your activities/the way you organise your daily life?

- Ask if not mentioned:
  - Why are you so satisfied/dissatisfied?

Q6. You are doing paid work and at the same time you are also responsible for household/family chores: How do you feel about this coexistence?

- Specify if necessary:
  - What do you find difficult, what do you appreciate?
  - How is it for you that you are paid for your employment and not for work at home?

Q7. Are there things you would do differently?

- Specify if necessary:
  - What would have to change for you to be more satisfied with your situation?
  - What or who is preventing you from making a change?

##### Social standards in relation to work

Q8. What do you answer when people ask you about your profession/work?

- Enquiries:
  - How is it that you answer like that?
  - How do people react to your answer?

Q9. How does your environment react to your working life/your life plan?

- Ask if not mentioned:

- What kind of expectations or standards in relation to work do you see yourself confronted with in your environment?

Q10. What do you yourself think about these opinions/expectations of your environment?

- Ask if not mentioned:

- Do you feel that the opinions (regarding work and family) in your environment influence you? In what way?

Q11. Do you sometimes wish that the topic of work and motherhood was looked at/approached differently in society?

Q12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Additionally, studies such as [Fuchs et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Lanfranconi et al. \(2021\)](#) for Switzerland as well as [Espartinez \(2023\)](#) for the Philippines, [Olga et al. \(2020\)](#) for Kazakhstan and [Farré et al. \(2020, p. 1\)](#) for Spain showed that “the COVID-19 crisis appears to have increased gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work, in the short-term” in many countries.

<sup>2</sup> Even if one does not take into account the unpaid work in sports clubs, interest groups, cultural associations, political parties and municipalities ([Madörin 2010a](#), p. 98).

<sup>3</sup> Demands for female full-time employment are currently being voiced, e.g., in discussions about the financial disadvantages that arise for mothers in their old age due to having made insufficient pension fund payments during their many years of part-time employment.

<sup>4</sup> Hiring paid domestic and care help costs too much for many families: according to estimates in the UNRISD research report, half of the women in Switzerland earn too little per hour to cover the cost of one hour of outside care for children or sick people ([Madörin 2010a](#), p. 103). Additionally, if families have the financial means, they usually resort to female domestic helpers (mostly migrant women), which still leaves domestic work in the hands of women ([Huber 2006](#), p. 22; [Hirsch 2016](#), p. 40; cf. [Lutz 2010](#)).

<sup>5</sup> According to Helfferich, 6 to 30 interviews is a “medium” sample size ([Helfferich 2011](#), p. 173). Considering the exploratory nature of this research, only eight mothers were interviewed, all from a homogenous context (white, living in Switzerland with a partner, middle-class, heterosexual cis women, working part-time in a paid job).

<sup>6</sup> The initials refer to the respective mothers.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, according to some of the interviewed mothers, fathers were held to a different standard than mothers with regard to domestic and care work. While it was taken for granted that mothers did this work, fathers were praised for it (J, S, M).

<sup>8</sup> At this point, it has to be emphasised once again that it is different for many working mothers in Switzerland: many families rely on two incomes to support their families (cf. [Crettaz 2018](#)).

<sup>9</sup> The word housewife (German: Hausfrau) was used by the interviewed mothers to reflect the stigma they felt for staying at home part-time. In German, this word has a somewhat negative connotation.

<sup>10</sup> Forty-two hours per week for full-time.

<sup>11</sup> According to Hirsch, “participation in paid work” is often seen exclusively “as a gain in female freedom”, since dependence on a male family breadwinner is removed ([Hirsch 2016](#), p. 147). The fact that this dependence is replaced by a new dependence, namely wage dependence, is pushed into the background (ibid., p. 158).

<sup>12</sup> It is not only the case that the mothers each have different attitudes, different ideals and ideas “also exist *within*” the mothers—as König has shown ([König 2012](#), pp. 91–92).

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