University of Minnesota

Silent Suffering:

Examining the Impact of Rhetoric on Working Mothers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Celia Baker

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# Introduction

## *Case Study and Concept Preview*

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, nearly all schools and childcare centers closed indefinitely.  This left many working mothers with a nearly impossible decision to make—choose their career at the expense of their children and personal health or choose their family while sacrificing the stability and identity of their professional lives.  Ultimately, millions of women chose—or in some cases, were forced into—the latter option, leaving their careers to provide support for their children during an unprecedented time.  The Institute for Women's Policy Research even defined women's exodus from the workforce as a "she-session" because the burden of the economic downturn was being primarily experienced by women (Hegewisch).  The use of such a term begins to illuminate the particular problematic narratives that affected women during this time.

In January 2020, women had achieved a milestone—they made up more than half the workforce, surpassing the workforce participation rate of men for the first time in American history (Miller).  But when the pandemic ravaged the country, 5.1 million mothers in the U.S. stopped working for pay, bringing workplace gender equality to a standstill, and regressing many of the gains women had made back to deeply ingrained traditional roles (Miller).  Namely, this meant taking on the responsibility for most or all of domestic labor, including home caretaking and child caregiving.  Although many women were already contending with these burdens before the pandemic, the lockdown period further exacerbated and exposed the cultural expectations for women and mothers.  In addition to the deepening of pre-existing gender inequalities, pandemic job losses and shifts in life and family responsibilities have greatly impacted women's identity

and agency.  The rhetoric surrounding public discussions of expectations on working women and mothers has heightened the detrimental effects of pandemic job losses, contributing significantly to the obstacle to combat such narratives and the ceaseless pressure to live up to unrealistic standards.

In a 2021 op-ed, Vice President Kamala Harris characterized the exodus of women from the workforce as a "national emergency" (Harris).  With a significant influence on public discourse with her being the vice president, Harris' framing of this issue failed to take into account the complexities of women's experiences from traditional gender norms to the current pressures of motherhood.  Gender communication ethics, which takes into account the nuances of ethical frameworks for communication with the differences in gender, was not upheld in this definition of the personal and professional crises women were experiencing during the pandemic. While the impacts on working women, including millions of job losses, were certainly profound, the term "national emergency" is potentially dangerous rhetoric to make use of in this context. The term makes it sound like the issue is only temporary and will be resolved in the near future, even though some of the root causes like gender inequities and caregiving norms are deeply ingrained in our culture and cannot easily or quickly be changed.  To truly change the issue, another social change would need to take place to positively shift the systemic structures of women's roles in society.  Ultimately, using such rhetoric as Harris does perpetuates the structural gender and identity oppression mothers face, harming the women to whom this applies and hindering the ability to shift the cultural narrative that demands both intensive mothering and ideal worker characteristics out of women while continuing to place them second to men.

The rhetoric used to discuss the exodus of women from the workforce highlights the prevailing struggles working mothers face, contributing to the loss of personal identity and life

agency. Because the pandemic forced a shift in women's roles, primarily in reverting back to the traditional relegating of women to domestic labor duties, women's working identities conflicted with cultural understandings of their "supposed" purpose in life. "The traditional "good mother" narrative of stay‑at‑home mothers 'entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations' has met 'business suits, big hair and lipstick'—neither of these ideals is adequate in sensemaking [women's] lived experiences during the lockdown" (Whiley et al. 615). Even a year into the pandemic, the U.S. culture continued to "rely on mothers to complete the extra labor to 'bridge the gaps between cultural change and its effect on childrearing,' treating unpaid care work performed by women as 'if it were a costless renewable resource'"(Cummins and Brannon 124). These prevailing narratives highlight the continued impact faced by women when terms like "she-cession" or "national emergency" are insufficiently used in an attempt to describe the collective suffering of women, without a realization of the grave daily experiences of these women and mothers.

The idealization of what motherhood should look like has created narratives harmful to the ability of women to establish and maintain identity and agency on their own terms. "During the pandemic, the media framed an "ideal mother figure" as "a mother as a financial planner, a mother as an educator and child caretaker, a mother as a husband's servant, and a career woman" (Elanda 30). "Intensive mothering" also became an increasingly pronounced ideal during the pandemic as a result of the social change beginning to take place both in the workplace and in the home for women's demands. "Intensive motherhood creates unrealistic expectations for mothers" with the idealization of "good" motherhood emerging from these intensive mothering ideologies (Cummins and Brannon 126). Many women experience guilt that "arises when [they] try to reconcile what society positions as conflicting narratives of "good" mothers and "good"

workers" (Whiley et al. 615). During the pandemic lockdown in particular, working mothers who left their jobs directly experienced the effects of these narratives by "simultaneously relish[ing] their lived experiences with their children and griev[ing] for [their job] loss" (615). Cultural expectations cause further guilt and shame for holding such antithetical notions in tension with each other, contributing to the perpetual nature of women being viewed as unsuccessful in either realm. Even when "women attempt to reconcile the competing discourses of what constitutes a "good" mother and a "good" worker, they face increased pressure and guilt at not fulfilling either" (Cummins and Brannon 127). Consequently, the personal identity and life agency of working mothers are harmed by such discourses, continuing to undermine the ability of these women to live beyond long-held cultural expectations.

### *Argument*

Working women and mothers have been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and while the job losses are the surface cause of changes, many of the challenges women face are due to systemic issues and the way these issues are discussed. The long-held cultural expectations and normative gender inequities working women and mothers face significantly impact their personal identity and life agency. The rhetoric of the "ideal" mother and "intensive mothering" ideology continues to undermine the value of women in the workplace, cultural frameworks that were brought to the forefront during the pandemic. Women face a double standard perpetuated by societal narratives of expectations for their responsibilities with limited space for their experience as both a worker and a mother.

The following research proposal presents my research study to examine how the rhetoric used to frame conversations of working mothers leaving the workforce during the pandemic perpetuates many of the pre-existing inequities faced by women. The identity and agency of

working women and mothers were and continue to be, negatively affected by harmful narratives of their place in society, and disenfranchised mothers in particular were impacted by "ideal" mother ideology that became more pronounced during the pandemic. Society's creation of the expectations for women, and its role in establishing the rhetoric for such expectations, damages women's selfhood and seizes the power and space for women to develop their own narratives for their lives outside of these expectations.

The three primary questions guiding my research project proposal are as follows:

1. *How did the discourse during the pandemic underscore the expectations and gender inequalities experienced by working women and mothers in family contexts, especially for mothers of disenfranchised communities?*

2. *What was the impact of cultural narratives for working women and mothers on their personal identity and life agency?*

3. *How does the rhetoric used to discuss women's roles affect the ability to work towards resolving the root causes of inequities?*

## Communication Ethics

### *Definition*

Communication ethics can be defined as an understanding of how communication rules are established by particular "goods" for each individual, influencing how people communicate with each other. The way people use language is guided by their personal morals and values and "assumes that multiple [common] 'goods' compete for allegiance in the public sphere" (Arnett et al. 24). Since everyone brings their own identities and experiences to communication

environments, there is subjectivity in understanding the world around us, and communication provides a space for negotiating our individual positionalities through discourse.

### *Framework within Communication Ethics Research*

Over the last few decades, women have made many gains in the workplace, including increased opportunities for promotion and advancement, higher wages with a narrowing gender pay gap, more recognition for accomplishments, and positive improvements in workplace culture and work-life balance (Miller). However, the millions of women exiting the workforce during the pandemic caused a significant shift, regressing many of these improvements. Because of the "deep‑rooted gender inequalities that existed before the pandemic," women's "economic and labor market positions" were disproportionately impacted (Yavorsky et al. 3). These realities lie in conjunction with the problematic narratives used to discuss women at a time of upheaval. Thus, my research proposal connects to social change in communication ethics (for the shift in lived realities for women during the pandemic) and gender communication ethics (incorporating the gender inequalities and pressures faced specifically by women through rhetoric about them).

A social change is defined as the transformation of culture, behavior, social institutions, and social structure over time. On an individual level, social change helps us "recognize our differences" and in doing so, "we believe that these differences make us better [and] that they provide us with a particular vantage point on social relations that create new visions for social change. We want to share those visions with the wider world to transform the sites of belonging we inhabit" (Carrillo-Rowe 34). The topic of how women were impacted by the pandemic both personally and professionally fits into the research area of social change in communication ethics because of these shifts that have occurred on both a cultural and individual level. According to Animating Democracy's Continuum of Impact, there are six factors that help to indicate social

change: knowledge, discourse, attitudes, capacity, participation, and systems/policies ("Typical Social and Civic Outcomes").  Because all these factors are present, women's exodus from the workforce can be considered a social change.

The framework of gender communication ethics relates to my argument because of the gender dynamics at play in discussions of women's place in society.  Gender communication ethics is defined as communication rules and standards upheld by respective gender differences with the implicit notion that certain people may enjoy authority "by the virtue of their having the dominant gender" (Alcoff 30).  Women's voices often lack the privilege of men's (the inherently dominant gender), and, thus, women must often succumb to generalizations that undermine their lived realities.  The gender communication power dynamic continues to play out through modern cultural standards for women.  Despite the gains women have made in recent decades for achieving greater workplace equality and value as "career women," "the role of these women workers is only considered as an additional task or economic support" and "the main task in the domestic sphere is still the benchmark for a woman's success" (Elanda 35).  Women are held to unattainable standards that disregard their complex identities in multiple public and private spaces.  Women continued to be harmed by "discourse on the ideal mother figure [since it] is one of the patriarchal cultural practices that continues to be applied. This gender inequality has caused a double burden for women to still look perfect in [both] the domestic and public spheres" (Elanda 35).  The detrimental framing of these discussions has been further perpetuated by the changing realities during the pandemic, including loss or shifts in work and changes to childcare needs, narratives that affect women in both their professional and personal lives.

The pressures placed on mothers during the pandemic also illustrate both a social change and complex communication gender dynamics because "normative motherhood discourses are

rewritten in response to, and as a result of, significant cultural and economic change.  Given that COVID-19 has dramatically shifted how the world operates, it stands to reason that society is in a liminal space of possibility, ready to challenge motherhood discourses" (Cummins and Brannon 124).  While working mothers have always faced a double burden, the pandemic highlighted the inequities and power struggles women face every day as cultural expectations are present in nearly every context of their lives.  "In an age where women have been increasingly empowered to 'smash glass ceilings' and reject traditional stay‑at‑home gender roles in favor of 'having it all,' the COVID‑19 pandemic has… brought to the forefront the many conflicting narratives that mothers… embody on a daily basis" (Whiley et al. 613-14).  Women regularly face the gender power imbalance in both communication spaces and the general communication regarding them, discourses that oppose the establishment of a common "good" critical to communication ethics.  Such environments put women's identity and agency in jeopardy, and the pandemic heightened the detrimental effects of pre-existing inequalities for mothers within a gender communication ethics lens.

### *Identity and Agency*

Identity consists of three integrated components that define one's sense of self: self-awareness, self-concept, and self-esteem.  In the context of social interactions and relationships, "messages are negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication," helping to form one's personal identity (Krumey 39).  Identity also comprises an individual's interpersonal characteristics, such as how a person perceives or talks to themselves, that shape how they process, interpret, and interact with information, others, and the world around them.  Agency is closely related to identity, and Marilyn Cooper argues that agency is "an emergent property of embodied individuals… based in individuals' lived knowledge that

their actions are their own" (421).  Since agency concerns the personal capacities of individuals to make decisions and act on their own accord, it is a crucial aspect of human self-determination. A lack of agency reduces the ability of individuals to exercise control over their lives, an experience common for working mothers during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the worker and mother identities of women came into conflict with each other due to necessary life shifts to accommodate the global health crisis.  While "working mothers' dual identities have always affected their careers," pandemic job losses were a significant contributor to a loss of identity and purpose (Miller).  Many women admit that "choice" played no role in their leaving the workforce.  According to a representative survey conducted by *The New York Times* in the first year of the pandemic, 80% of mothers indicated "they were the only parent who considered quitting—their partner did not" (Miller).  The compounding effects of job loss (and identity loss) plus the lack of choice in many cases (and the resulting loss of agency) elucidate the problematic nature of the ingrained cultural expectations for women as regularly relegated in the public sphere.

Women experienced a loss of agency over their lives when forced to choose between their careers and their families, with the latter option often being the default choice.  However, "it can be hard for mothers to admit that spending all day with their children isn't what they want" because of cultural expectations of intensive mothering (Miller).  Intensive motherhood is a "normative discourse relegating mothers to the sole role of child-rearing," and a discourse that "demonstrates that a "good mother" is one who spends considerable time, energy, and resources focused on her children" (Cummins and Brannon 124, 126).  Such lack of agency over career outcomes, in conjunction with enduring gender inequities, has caused women to lose purpose, aspirations, and "complex selves," with many grieving the loss of their professional identities

while struggling to accept their identity as simply "mom." No mother affected by job losses during the pandemic was spared, either; "no matter the jobs they held, the education they had or the backgrounds they came from, [women] described a loss of identity apart from being a mother" (Miller). The loss of agency in this context further undermines the achievements women have attempted to achieve outside of their position as an entity for childbearing and childrearing. The standard notion of framing women as lesser because of their desires outside this narrow lens further confines the spaces for women to exist in the discourse of issues directly affecting them.

Cultural narratives of motherhood considerably contribute to the loss of life agency women experience. "Universally, motherhood is idealized as the pinnacle of a woman's achievements, dreams and ambitions," so the guilt of women grieving their work identities conflicts with the cultural expectations they are expected to uphold (Elanda 29). Working mothers regularly experience a shame cycle as a result of the feeling they are not measuring up to culture's expectations for either the "ideal" mother or the "ideal" worker. The shame cycle stems from the cultural discourse on women's expectations and "typically begins with guilt, which leads to shame, then the need to feel grateful, and then back to guilt" (Arthur and Guy 165). Additionally, "the American economy rewards undivided loyalty," applauds long working hours, and disregards the need for personal, family, or vacation time (Miller). On the other hand, the intensive mothering "economy" praises a mother's full devotion to her children while denying her own pursuits as a working professional or as a person outside of these dueling identities. These "crude dichotomizations… confine women's personhoods to rigid social norms: good or bad. The conflict between "good" mother and "good" worker became all the more apparent during the COVID‑19 lockdowns as [women] found [them]selves forcibly sent

back into being homemakers, potentially "undoing" what decades of feminism fought against" (Whiley et al. 614).  These cultural ideologies tie into gender communications ethics through the way they influence the discourse surrounding women.  During the pandemic when women lost their identity as workers and, hence, the agency over their lives, the cultural expectations only further reverted back to traditional narratives, placing women at a disadvantage in reestablishing these self-rights.

## The "Ideal" Mother vs. Disenfranchised Mothers

Many mothers experience the societal expectations of motherhood, but they can be particularly problematic for women who do not fit the "ideal" mother.  Not only do single mothers, mothers of color, and mothers with less education experience discrimination due to their demographics, but because they lie outside the implicit requirements for the "good mother ideal," such as being married, white, or middle-class, they can only "strive to meet intensive motherhood standards but will rarely, if ever, be considered good mothers as a result" (Cummins and Brannon 126).  These notions degrade women's confidence in their mothering abilities and harm their ability to develop a positive association with their identity as mothers.  Unlike women who more closely align with the "ideal" mother (i.e., white and affluent) who faced an identity crisis as a result of the loss of labor force participation, disenfranchised mothers contend with a number of other factors outside of a career that shapes their identity as mothers.  Often, these factors include disparaged identity characteristics that are not developed intrapersonally but instead defined by society, negatively affecting the agency of disenfranchised mothers to define their identity for themselves.  The pandemic job losses also further undermined the ability of these women to be able to achieve idealistic motherhood standards because of increased financial distress and the lack of outside support for managing their family, including childcare services.

Single mothers, mothers of color, and mothers with less education all faced setbacks during the pandemic that were not experienced at the same level by white, privileged mothers. For single mothers, the need to take on increased caregiving responsibilities when schools and childcare centers were closed, "denied [them any] personal time, [so] their identities as workers and mothers were no longer "mutually supportive." These women felt they were better mothers before the pandemic because they retained professional lives" (Hertz et al. 2038). Compared to married or partnered women, the employment rate of single mothers with children five or younger declined by 7.6% more (Barroso and Kochhar). Single-earner households led by women remain more vulnerable to financial distress and poverty and this perpetuates the cycle of single mothers being at a societal disadvantage compared to married/partnered mothers.

The employment rate for Black and Latina women fell by nearly twice the percentage as that of white women, illustrating the "particularly pernicious impact of the shesession on women of color" (Hegewisch 3). Since many of these women have overlapping disenfranchised identities, such as being a person of color and a single mother, for example, the effects were multiplied with the "disproportionate impact of pandemic-related job loss on unpartnered mothers reflect[ing]... the demographic characteristics of this group" (Barroso and Kochhar). In September 2020, Black women made up 31.4% of unpartnered mothers compared with only 12.2% of mothers overall. Additionally, only 26.9% of unpartnered mothers had at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 43.3% of all mothers. This illustrates how the intersectionality of mothers with societally disenfranchised identities and young children faced—and continues to face— a "double jeopardy… given the childcare responsibilities, fewer economic resources, and vulnerable labor market positions borne by these women" (Qian and Fuller 96). Long-term, "gendered employment patterns among the less educated [and other disenfranchised groups],

may further put working-class women in particularly disadvantaged positions in the labor

market" (Qian and Fuller 96).  Ultimately, pre-existing hardships faced by disenfranchised

mothers are perpetuated, equality measures further regress, and stigmatization increases in our

culture for members of disadvantaged communities.  This harms the ability of these mothers to

maintain their personal identity and life agency, improve their personal and professional lives,

and sufficiently provide for their children's financial, emotional, social, and health needs.

**Rhetoric and Society's Role**

Societal expectations on mothers and the rhetoric used to frame such expectations play a

major role in driving the ongoing inequalities women face.  The perpetuation of traditional

"patriarchal identity formation" and our culture's idea that women "give up their own leisure

time and think about decreasing work to accommodate home responsibilities… facilitates

feelings of guilt in women" (Whiley et al. 615-16).  Women are relegated to an implicitly

understood place in society (i.e., in the home, taking on domestic labor and caregiving

responsibilities), a place they often are expected to remain without complaint.  Since our culture

"frame[s] work for women as a choice, … when they unexpectedly lose a job in a society in

which their working was in question all the time, it really throws how they're thinking about who

they are into question" (Miller).  Women experience disempowerment due to such narratives,

which makes it even more burdensome to maintain distinct identities as a worker, mother, and an

individual person outside of the former two realms.  Ideal mother narratives also perpetuate the

patriarchal thought of women's place in society and "discourse about the ideal mother figure is a

way of disciplining the female body, which is physical and mental" (Elanda 35).  The rhetoric

surrounding women and "the construction of the ideal mother embodied in the media causes

gender inequality that women must experience,... giving women a double or even a multiple

burden" (Elanda 26). Women must contend with conflicting burdens placed onto them through societal discourses, further undermining their identity and agency while society conserves pre-existing gender inequalities.

To understand the gender inequalities at play in connection to the rhetoric surrounding this issue, it is essential to recognize the catalyst for such narratives. "There are many reasons that mothers are the default caregivers, beginning with centuries of tradition. They are also generally paid less than their husbands. But this is a vicious cycle: The gender pay gap starts when women become mothers—because they spend more time than men on child care, or employers assume they will. Then, when one parent has to step back from paid work for caregiving, mothers do because they earn less, reinforcing the pattern" (Miller). While rooted in traditional expectations, this cycle is also continued through traditional narratives on the subject. When women try to achieve professional or career success, they are viewed as bad mothers. But as mothers, women are constantly told they are not doing enough for their children and, at the same, are not successful by any means in the eyes of the corporate world by focusing on their families' needs. The conflicting narratives undermine women's ability to achieve success in either area. This has only been further compounded during the pandemic which required life shifts to accommodate the grave situation being faced—again, shifts predominately taken on by and a burden for women.

## Rationale

There currently is a lack of comprehensive research specifically examining the relationship between discourse surrounding working women and mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect it has had on their personal identity, life agency, professional ambitions,

and the perpetuation of cultural expectations.  The discussion in this proposal highlights the need to complete a focused study exploring the effect of rhetoric, including intensive mothering ideologies and the dual identities of mothers in addition to the gender- and demographic-based inequalities carried out through contextual narratives.  After the pandemic, "society is in a liminal space of possibility, ready to challenge motherhood discourses" yet mothers continue to face inequities through the "pervasive cultural discourse of intensive motherhood" (Cummins and Brannon 124-25).  Such discourses about the "ideal mother figure is a discourse echoed for working women to continued to be ideal mother figures to carry out their domestic duties, [and] this discourse had oppressed working women during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Elanda 37).  My proposed research extends upon similar work by taking the understanding of cultural expectations on working mothers and the concepts of identity and agency and applying them to a gender communication ethics and rhetoric framework.

## Future research areas and questions

A case study for a future area of research that could extend the current case study and research being proposed here is to focus on how modern society, media, and the general public defined the identity and agency of women in the context of their leaving or considering leaving the workforce during the period of the pandemic.  The case study would specifically examine the disparities in the rhetoric used by specific outlets to discuss white, affluent women versus disenfranchised mothers.  White mothers are often afforded superior characterizations over mothers from disenfranchised backgrounds, so the intensive mothering ideal "persists because [such] discourse is what society believes children 'need and deserve,' based on a white, privileged norm" (Cummins and Brannon 126).   Exploring the rhetoric used to discuss mothers concerning their working status and determining how identity and agency were impacted for

disenfranchised mothers would help establish a framework for the broader issue of disparities not just between men and women but also those between women of different life positionalities. Additionally, "intensive motherhood recenters white, privileged mothers as the only acceptable model for parenting through insidious depictions in media and everyday conversations about how parenting should happen" (Cummins and Brannon 135). These discourses often fail to take into account mothers from other backgrounds, creating the necessity to further expand on my first research question for this proposal to ascertain how the discourse during the pandemic has underscored the expectations of working women and mothers, especially for mothers of disenfranchised communities.

The aspect of childcare could also be incorporated into this case study by investigating the framework used to discuss childcare options and the effect this has on working mothers, particularly disenfranchised mothers. Since "the institutions through which reproduction is accomplished—namely, family, education, and childcare—show every sign of having reached the limits of their adaptability and resilience," it is logical to further study the pre-existing societal issue of reliable childcare in the wake of the pandemic (Hertz et al. 2042). Women living in poverty, women of color, and single mothers have experienced more intense setbacks than white women in general, which explains why "low-wage women had stronger attachments to work because of the effort it took to arrange adequate child care" (Miller). Thus, the framing of narratives for childcare options and access broadly affects disenfranchised mothers, including their identity and agency. Overall, this area of further research would consist of a critical analysis to compare the disparate rhetoric used to discuss how mothers of privileged versus unprivileged backgrounds leaving the workforce have been defined and, ultimately, affected the personal identity and life agency of disenfranchised mothers.

# Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the rhetoric and narratives used to discuss women's exodus from the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these narratives are tied to personal identity, life agency, and pre-existing gender inequalities. The proposed study centers on the framework of gender communication ethics and social change and aims to call attention to an understudied aspect of an intersection of these areas in communication ethics research. The rhetoric used to discuss working mothers and their roles in culture has further undermined women and has been particularly problematic for mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds or disenfranchised identities. The long-term impacts on women's career success and societal expectations have yet to be seen, but continuing the conversation is essential for examining society's role in perpetuating the collective suffering of women and mothers. As Cummins and Brannon state, "If normative motherhood discourses are rewritten in a time of change, then now is the time to change the discourse into more inclusive and humane expectations of all genders" (124). The rhetoric that has framed working mothers during the pandemic, in addition to the prevailing narratives of expectations on mothers and the place for women in society, continues to harm not only women's personal identity and life agency but also their livelihoods. This study aims to shed light on the implications of such rhetoric through a gender communication lens, with the goal of contributing a new perspective to current research on how working women and mothers have been impacted by the pandemic both professionally and personally.

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