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The Boundaries of Motherhood: Narratives of Fluidity, Resistance, and the Redefinition of Women's Maternal Experience

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Extended Abstract

Background and Aim

Motherhood, as both a social institution and a personal experience, has been historically constructed through normative discourses that define the “good mother” as self-sacrificing, devoted, and primarily responsible for caregiving. Feminist scholarship has extensively examined how these normative maternal ideals constrain women's subjectivities and life trajectories, while also highlighting the diverse strategies through which women negotiate, resist, or redefine these expectations. In contemporary Iranian society, motherhood is situated at the intersection of rapid socio-cultural transformations, enduring patriarchal structures, and shifting gender relations. Urbanization, increasing female participation in higher education and the labor market, changing family dynamics, and the emergence of new cultural imaginaries have all contributed to a more fluid and contested terrain of maternal practices and meanings.

The dominant state and cultural narratives in Iran continue to promote idealized models of intensive motherhood and gendered divisions of labor, positioning women primarily as mothers and caregivers. However, women's lived experiences increasingly reveal tensions, ambivalences, and creative negotiations that challenge these norms. In this context, exploring the ways women articulate and inhabit their maternal identities offers critical insight into broader processes of gender transformation and social change.

This study aims to examine how Iranian mothers construct, negotiate, and transform the boundaries of motherhood through their everyday experiences and narratives. More specifically, the article seeks to analyze how notions of fluidity, resistance, and redefinition emerge in mothers' accounts, revealing complex strategies of navigating structural constraints, cultural expectations, and personal desires. By employing a grounded theory approach, the study aims to theorize maternal subjectivities not as fixed identities but as dynamic, contested, and contextually situated processes.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in grounded theory methodology. This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of mothers' lived experiences and to generate theoretical insights from the data, rather than imposing predefined analytical categories. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 dual-earner couples residing in Tehran. All participants were employed, urban, and of middle social status.

Interviews focused on participants' experiences of parenting, divisions of domestic labor, negotiations over childcare responsibilities, and their perceptions of maternal roles and identities. The interview process encouraged open-ended storytelling, enabling participants to articulate their subjective experiences and reflections in their own terms.

Data analysis followed the classic grounded theory procedures, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This iterative and comparative process involved moving back and forth between data collection and analysis, allowing emerging themes to shape subsequent interviews. Codes and categories were constantly compared, refined,

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and integrated to construct a coherent theoretical framework. Memos and analytical notes were also employed to document the researcher's evolving interpretations and to ensure reflexivity throughout the research process.

Findings

The analysis reveals three interrelated thematic dimensions that characterize contemporary maternal experiences among the studied women: fluidity, resistance, and redefinition of motherhood.

1. Fluidity of maternal boundaries:

Maternal identities and practices are not experienced as fixed or predetermined but as fluid and situational. Women continuously shift between different roles—such as professional worker, caregiver, partner, and individual subject—depending on context, time, and available support. This fluidity reflects both structural pressures (e.g., workplace demands, lack of institutional childcare support) and personal agency in reconfiguring everyday practices. The result is a dynamic, sometimes fragmented but also adaptive mode of mothering that departs from rigid traditional scripts.

2. Resistance to normative expectations:

Participants articulated various forms of resistance against dominant cultural and familial expectations of motherhood. Resistance was not always overt or collective but often took subtle, individualized forms—such as challenging expectations of total maternal availability, questioning unequal domestic divisions of labor, or asserting personal autonomy in decision-making. These resistant practices often emerged in negotiations with spouses, extended family members, and workplace structures, indicating the multilayered arenas in which maternal identities are contested.

3. Redefinition of maternal subjectivities:

Through their narratives, women engaged in active processes of redefining what it means to be a “good mother.” They developed alternative moral frameworks that valued emotional presence, quality of interaction, and self-realization alongside caregiving responsibilities. This redefinition often involved reconciling personal aspirations with maternal duties, thereby crafting individualized maternal subjectivities that transcend dichotomies between traditional and modern motherhood. Importantly, these redefinitions are not merely discursive but are enacted through everyday practices, negotiations, and decisions.

Together, these findings illustrate that maternal subjectivities among urban, employed Iranian women are characterized by continuous negotiation across multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses and contexts. Motherhood is experienced less as a stable identity and more as a dynamic field of meaning-making and boundary-setting.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study contributes to feminist scholarship on motherhood by foregrounding the dynamic and contested nature of maternal subjectivities in contemporary Iran. It challenges essentialist and normative constructions of motherhood that dominate both state discourses and cultural imaginaries, showing instead how women actively navigate, resist, and reshape these discourses in their everyday lives. The concepts of fluidity, resistance, and redefinition offer a useful analytical lens for understanding the multiplicity and complexity of maternal experiences in contexts marked by both rapid social change and enduring patriarchal norms.

The findings highlight how women's maternal practices are embedded within broader structural and cultural dynamics, including gendered labor markets, inadequate institutional supports, and familial expectations. Yet, women are not passive recipients of these structures; they exercise agency in negotiating and transforming them, even if incrementally and unevenly. By redefining maternal norms and crafting individualized identities, these women contribute to broader processes of gender renegotiation in Iranian society.

From a policy perspective, the study underscores the urgent need to recognize and support the diversity of maternal experiences and practices. Current policies and institutional frameworks often rely on rigid and traditional conceptions of motherhood, failing to address the realities of dual-earner families and women's multifaceted identities. Expanding childcare services, promoting more equitable workplace arrangements, and challenging gendered expectations within families are essential steps toward enabling more just and supportive environments for mothers.

In conclusion, the study reveals that the boundaries of motherhood in contemporary Iran are neither fixed nor uniformly imposed. They are constantly shaped and reshaped through women's everyday practices, negotiations, and resistances. Recognizing this fluidity opens the door to more inclusive and egalitarian conceptualizations of motherhood that reflect women's lived realities rather than idealized norms. The grounded theory approach employed in this research offers valuable theoretical insights into how maternal subjectivities are formed, contested, and transformed within specific socio-cultural contexts, providing a foundation for future feminist and sociological investigations of motherhood.

Keywords: Gender, Femininity, Fluid Mothering, Dominant Motherhood Discourse, Structural Pressure, Women's Lived Experience, Grounded Theory, Digital Mothering, Non-biological Mothering