

ANDREA O'REILLY

“Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable”: Mothers and COVID-19

The central directive of the COVID-19 pandemic has been conveyed in two words: stay home. Yet there has been little media coverage, public policy, or social research on how families are managing under social isolation. Few have acknowledged, let alone sought to support, the crucial work mothers are doing as frontline workers to keep families functioning in these times of increasing uncertainty. Mothers do the bulk of domestic labour and childcare, and with social isolation, the burden of care work has increased exponentially, as mothers are running households with little or no support and under close to impossible conditions. Many mothers are also now engaged in paid labour from home and are responsible for their children's education as schools remain closed indefinitely. Mothers have little to no respite from their 24/7 schedule, since most outdoor activities have been cancelled for children, and no one is allowed into their homes. Add income or employment loss, financial or housing instability, food insecurity, single parenting, abusive situations, or recent experiences of migration and the stress is amplified. The article explores the care and crisis of mothers under COVID-19 through an examination of comments and discussions on the Facebook group Mothers and COVID-19, which I set up over a two-week period in early May 2020. The article considers how mothers are managing the new requirements of motherwork under the destabilizing restraints of this pandemic. It also addresses and asks why the essential and frontline work of mothering in this pandemic has been so discounted, disregarded, and dismissed by governments, media, and the larger society. The article seeks to make visible what has been made invisible and render audible what has been silenced—the labour of motherwork under COVID-19—in order to inform, support, and empower mothers through and after this pandemic.

The central directive of the COVID-19 pandemic has been conveyed in two words: stay home. Yet there has been little media coverage, public policy, or social research on how families are managing under social isolation. Few have

acknowledged, let alone sought to support, the crucial work mothers are doing as frontline workers to keep families functioning in these times of increasing uncertainty. Mothers do the bulk of domestic labour and childcare, and with social isolation, the burden of care work has increased exponentially, as mothers are running households with little or no support and under close to impossible conditions. In her article “The Coronavirus is a Disaster for Feminism,” Helen Lewis writes the following: “Despite the mass entry of women into the workforce during the 20th century, the phenomenon of the ‘second shift’ still exists. Across the world—women, including those with jobs—do more housework and have less leisure time than their male partners.” Many mothers are now also engaged in paid labour from home and are responsible for their children’s education, as schools remain closed indefinitely. The pandemic has particularly compounded what I call the “third shift”: the emotional and intellectual labour of mother work. This idea is similar to what Sara Ruddick has termed “maternal thinking”: the organizing, remembering, anticipating, worrying, and planning that mothers take on for the family. As well, under COVID-19, many mothers now exist in what may be termed the “fourth shift”: the homeschooling of children. A recent *New York Times* survey found that 80 per cent of mothers said they were mostly responsible for home schooling. Only 3 per cent of women said that men were doing more (Daniel). Mothers have little to no respite from their 24/7 weeks, as most outdoor activity has been cancelled for children and no one is allowed into their homes. In her article “Coronavirus Could Hurt Women the Most,” Soraya Chemaly notes the following: “As this pandemic unfolds, the caregiver second shift is becoming a third and fourth shift. Children are home from school, partners are home from the office, and elderly parents are at high risk of COVID-19 infection.” Add income or employment loss, financial or housing instability, food insecurity, single parenting, abusive situations, or recent experiences of migration and the stress is amplified. Indeed as Dr. Nathan Stall from Sinai Health System in Toronto emphasizes, “All of us are being affected by this, but I always think it’s important to recognize that women during a pandemic are really bearing the brunt of all this and I think that should not be ignored” (qtd. in Dunham).

This article explores the crisis of mothers under COVID-19 through an examination of the comments and discussions on the Facebook group Mothers and COVID-19 established by the author over a two week period: May 1 and May 14 2020. It also considers how mothers are managing the new requirements of motherwork under the destabilizing restraints of this pandemic. In its explorations, the article addresses and asks why the essential and frontline work of mothering in this pandemic has been so discounted, disregarded, and dismissed by governments, media, and the larger society. It seeks to make visible what has been made invisible and render audible what has been

silenced—the labour of motherwork under COVID-19—in order to inform, support, and empower mothers through and after this pandemic.

March 11, 2020: The Day the World Changed

All of us will remember where we were when the COVID-19 pandemic was officially announced on March 11, 2020. I was in the Denver airport with my daughter Casey en route to the Association for Studies of Women in Mythology conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our flight from Toronto was delayed, resulting in us missing our connecting flight to Albuquerque and leaving us stranded at the Denver airport. After struggling to connect to the airport’s Wi-Fi, both our social media pages opened with post after post about the pandemic and directives from the Canadian government to return to Canada immediately. We spent that night at an airport hotel in Denver, and after many queues and questions concerning the rerouting of our luggage, we finally boarded an early morning flight to Albuquerque. The first days of the pandemic were spent at a near-empty hotel with other goddess scholars in the expansive and remote beauty of the New Mexico desert. We returned home on the Monday on crowded planes with other shell-shocked passengers, and upon arrival at the Toronto airport, I said goodbye to my daughter Casey not knowing that our future times together would be via FaceTime. My son Jesse was travelling in Asia, and after having to change flights several times as borders around the world closed, he returned home on the Wednesday. My partner was at our cottage where he has been living close to fulltime since his retirement two years earlier. Now in a fourteen-day self-quarantine with no food in the house and no means to get it, my son and I packed up our family’s six cats to join my partner at the cottage.

My employment and income have continued as a professor, and as the publisher of Demeter Press, I am now working harder than ever to keep the press going as book sales plummet. My nine planned conferences and speaking engagements for the spring and summer have all been cancelled. Like other professors, I am struggling to keep up with my committee work, research, teaching, graduate supervision through Zoom meetings, endless emails, research and writing without an office, and with a wavering resolve to keep focused and disciplined in the uncertainty, anxiety, and worry of this pandemic. In social isolation at the cottage, my sole contact with the outside world has been through Facebook and the television news.

Why Is No One Talking about This? Mothers, Care, and Crisis under COVID-19

As I am a scholar of motherhood, publisher of a press on motherhood, and have many mother friends, the majority of the posts on my Facebook newsfeed are by mothers who feel exhausted, overwhelmed, panicked, and terrified; they share stories of guilt, self-blame, and despair at not being able to manage or cope, and talk about feeling shamed and judged for their failures caused by the pandemic. One particularly heart-wrenching post from April 2, 2020, and shared by a friend, was by a single mother who was bullied and harassed when she took her children with her to shop for needed groceries:

If anybody has ever wondered what defeat looks like, here it is folks. This is the look of a single mom during a pandemic. The look of a single mom who hasn't left the house except for a grocery order pickup since they called the State of Emergency. A grocery order which had \$100 worth of items that wasn't available, but that I still needed even though it wasn't available. The look of a single mom who decided to pack up the children to go to Costco to pick up a prescription and to hopefully get the rest of the things I needed to be able to stay home for a few weeks at least. Because my options are a) get a babysitter which I'm not allowed to do b), leave the kids home alone which I'm not allowed to do, or c) get someone to pick up my stuff which by the way equaled 300\$. So this is the look of a single mom who was rudely told by not one, not two, but three Costco employees that it is the last time I will be able to bring in my children, and overheard two employees rudely point at me and say "yeah are we putting up signs about children because clearly they're not gonna listen until we do." Most employees were amazing, smiling, and friendly, but I'm guessing a few stressed ones took it out on me. You're looking at the face of a single mom who can't ship their kids off to their dads and have a break. A single mom who's been trying to follow the rules, who has been trying my best at working from home with an eight-year-old and a four-year-old who fight and scream and need to eat and are bored just like every other kid. And the look of a single mom who came out of Costco with tears streaming down her face to hear that I will now have to add homeschooling to the mix.

I shared the post with these comments:

The current situation of forced social isolation for single mothers is not sustainable. Governments and communities must act now to provide support for mothers in such impossible situations. While I applaud the Canadian government for all they are doing for those in

paid labour—Canada Emergency Relief Benefit, wage subsidies, and so forth—mothers in their homes doing the impossible are frontline workers in this pandemic and are more than entitled to, and deserving of, our respect and support.

Although most of the many comments were supportive of this single mother’s untenable situation, a few wrote that “what she did was still wrong” or wondered “Doesn’t this woman have any family or a friend to help her?” However, and as I responded, “Under the rules of social distancing, no one can be in her home other than those that reside there; no family, babysitter, etc. can give a single mother even an hour of respite. No one can live like this for weeks, let alone the now proposed several months.” Indeed, another single mother commented: “I have emotional resources to draw on, people to FaceTime, and only one toddler—who doesn’t have additional needs—but have been REALLY challenged by the isolation. I can’t imagine what it’d be like to have compounding factors making things harder AND to be facing months and months alone. It is a massive reminder that we are NOT designed to mother alone; it’s completely unnatural.” Indeed, the situation is completely unnatural and unsustainable, but why I ask is no one talking about this in the media? And why is there no public policy being developed or research undertaken to support mothers in this pandemic?

As mothers’ stories filled my Facebook newsfeed, another story was being told in mainstream news media. Commercial after commercial and news story after news were acknowledging and giving thanks to the frontline workers of the pandemic: first doctors and nurses, but the list soon expanded to include social workers, retail workers, truck drivers, transit workers, fire fighters, letter carriers, restaurant staff, pharmacists, first responders, and sanitation workers.



We are rightly honouring the essential services of those who are keeping us safe and cared for, but no one in the countless commercials or news coverage I have seen is publicly thanking mothers or acknowledging, let alone honouring, the essential work mothers are doing in our homes that are keeping families safe and cared for. Jackie Dunham argues that “there’s this idea that we’re all in this together, but in many ways, it certainly is not an equal-opportunity pandemic.... The people that are impacted most will always be the most marginalized ... that includes all women, but especially those women who are from racialized groups, newcomer communities, Indigenous women, and those with disabilities.” I would suggest that it is more specifically mothers who are most impacted by the pandemic because it is mothers who are doing the necessary and arduous carework to sustain their families and communities. However, no one is recognizing let alone supporting mothers as frontline workers or acknowledging and appreciating what mothers are managing and accomplishing in their homes under unimaginable circumstances. Indeed, as Claire Gagne asks, “Why is no one talking about how unsustainable this is for working parents?” She continues: “While it seems like every day, we hear of new funding for businesses, support for students, and money for the unemployed (all necessary and worthwhile of course), I haven’t heard a damn thing about a solution for parents who’ve suddenly had all their supports—school, childcare, and extended family—ripped away, and then been expected to carry on with their fulltime jobs.” With the increasing pressures caused by the pandemic, which have removed all separation between work, family, and home life, we need to be asking what toll this situation is taking on mothers and how as a society we can support mothers and their essential service of caregiving. As Farhad Majoo asks, “How could anyone think [that] attempting to work fulltime while rooming with, feeding, and educating one or more children during the pandemic [is sustainable]?”

#Mothersarefrontlineworkers

In April, increasingly frustrated and angered by the deafening silence on mothers and mothering in the pandemic, I created the hashtag #mothersarefrontlineworkers and developed a call for papers for the forthcoming Demeter Press collection *Mothers, Mothering and COVID-19: Dispatches from a Pandemic*. I was also interviewed for the York University media story “Mothering through a Pandemic: COVID-19 and the Evolving Role of Mothers” (Goodfellow) and did a webinar titled “Mothers are Frontline Workers: Crisis and Care under COVID-19.” In each, I talked about the disconnect between what was happening in homes across the world and what was being reported, and I emphasized that we need to ask and address why motherwork, even during a pandemic when it is so crucial, remains so

devalued and invisible. I talked about the importance of knowing how mothers are managing in this pandemic and what can be done to better support them. I decided that one way to both learn about what mothers were experiencing in the pandemic and to support them through it was through a mothers and COVID-19 Facebook group as well as an accompanying website. Both aimed to inform, support and empower mothers through and after the pandemic. I then learned about a COVID-19 grant from my university, and with much haste and earnestness, I applied.

I did not receive the grant funding, and although I was disappointed, I was not truly surprised: if governments and the public are not interested in mothers, why would a granting agency be? Though disillusioned, I still went ahead and set up the Facebook group Mothers and COVID-19. In twenty-four hours, the group had two hundred members, and after finishing this article on June 1st, two weeks after the launch of the group, 940 mothers had joined. The mothers are a diverse group: single, partnered, young, older, poor, affluent, multi-racial, queer, straight, rural, urban, secular, religious, with young and older children, and differently abled. The mothers come from more than two dozen countries, including Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Guatemala, Greece, Lebanon, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Pakistan, Tunisia, Turkey, Trinidad, Scotland, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. The website, mothersandcovid.com, was launched on May 7th.

Mothers and COVID 19 Facebook Group: Reflections from a Pandemic

In this section, I will share some of the posts and discussions from the Mothers and COVID-19 Facebook group that took place between May 1 and May 14. The comments shared are from single, partnered, straight, and queer mothers from various countries, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Pakistan, and the United States. I selected a meme titled “The Invisible Load of Motherhood: Working from Home during COVID” by @_HAPPYASAMOTHER for the group’s photo banner (pictured next page).

The responses to the image were as rapid as they were fierce with more than forty members commenting on the meme in a few hours. Below are some examples:

Here’s another: Doing cooking or some similar thing to be creative and to reduce stress, but family members don’t recognize the contribution (and step up and do some other housework to compensate).

And another: taking care of kids while an elderly, terminally ill parent is under hospice care over 500 miles away and coordinating care for her over the phone.

And when did I have to do all the damn cooking and foraging for food?



Totally. Since when am I suddenly the only person who can think in advance of what we might need to buy from the supermarket or the local shop if we can magically get someone to go and fetch it for us?

Taking responsibility for cooking healthy meals for the family, and for organizing weekly deliveries of shopping, selecting the food and other goods needed and negotiating everyone’s needs and likes alongside availability in shops.

I hadn’t realized marriage instantly meant that one person miraculously loses most of their cognitive functions and the other attains even more miraculous superpowers such as psychically knowing what is needed by every member of the household on two or four legs.

It’s hard and then WASHING all the damn vegetables and groceries to make them safe when they come into the house. It sometimes takes an hour to go through them one by one 😞. It’s exhausting and takes time away from work.

This is me even before the pandemic as I work from home, but at least I got a “break” during school hours to focus on my work. And yet all I ever hear is you’re so lucky to be able to work from home. You must have so much free time.

Now it’s even worse, as I have to help with schoolwork, coordinate deliveries for myself and my elderly parents, [and] try to keep my son happy and occupied as he has no siblings. I just want to lock myself in my room and cry. But I can’t. I must keep on going because there’s no other choice 😞.

Many members shared commiserations:

[I am] feeling all of this is absolutely impossible, particularly as a precariously employed academic with young kids. Publish or perish? I'm perishing ... trying desperately to keep afloat and feeling more pressure than ever to do so. Meanwhile, Mom guilt could swallow me whole. It really feels like a lose-lose situation here, whereby work and mothering come at the expense of each other.

The replies to her post were many:

I feel it but have been carrying this primary mothering/caring/home load since before COVID19, but it makes me slow and COVID19 has amplified it.... My tip is you work every day no matter how slow; keep at it every day slow and steady.

I agree; slow and steady is key. I couldn't wrap my head around revisions for this chapter I was working on. Some days I didn't touch it, but other days, I worked a little on it and was able to finish it for its deadline.

I feel your pain. I am continually two or three weeks slower behind schedule at the present time; COVID19 has intensified it by putting me behind any deadline by at least another week or two minimum.... It's also impossible to get any deep thinking writing time. I use a strategy where I keep a journal of what am up to, so I don't lose track.

I am caught with this constant feeling of never being able to do any of the things I normally do correctly—lousy and absent-minded mum, terrible teacher, awful housewife, poor home office worker. My twenty-four-hour-day is divided into a million things, and none of them are satisfactorily done, at least not to my usual standards.

Most posts were on the unbearable load under COVID-19, particularly for mothers who are now working from home and for the many who are also now responsible for their children's education with schools closed indefinitely. The examples below highlight this pressure felt by mothers:

COVID 19 has definitely hit the world hard. Its shaken it to the core, shuffled everything that was considered routine and thrown it right at our faces—BAM! As a working mother, I would say that the load is unbearable. We are picking ourselves up every hour to meet the needs of everyone around us, especially our little babies, toddlers, and young children.

I am working much longer than usual. My seven-year-old daughter complains to me because I can't play with her. The times of work and

those of care are totally mixed. This is an unprecedented situation for everyone. My positioning as a mother, worker, cleaner, cook, etc. are permanently mixed. Also, now my home is the space for work, play, watching TV, etc.

Since lockdown started, the care of our toddler has been a fulltime responsibility for my husband and I, in addition to our work (which has actually increased in the context of the pandemic). Add to that fasting (it is the month of Ramadan for us), and you have a mama who is really seconds away from a breakdown (in fact I have multiple breakdowns a day).

WTF just happened? The working day is now relentless.

The homework helping, oh my gosh. I have a grade 6 student with learning disabilities,... I have cried by the end of the day a few times now. We can't not do the assignments because making it through school is already a struggle, and she is so often written off as 'bad' [that] I don't want this to be a slip through the crack's opportunity. EXHALE.

Lots of us parents are also working from home. I have a full caseload of my social work clients that I have to talk with each day, and write case notes for, and make referrals for, and now I also have to spend hours doing homework with my son who has ADHD! It's HARD!!

I am a professor of sociology and have been working fulltime from home since the second week of February. I am a single parent of two boys who are ten and twelve, and their dad has them one or two nights each week. I am the primary caregiver of my children. My youngest son has [had] extreme asthma since the age of three: his oxygen is monitored throughout the day, and he is taking steroids and anti-allergy meds. On a good year, he lands in the hospital once or twice, due to his asthma. There is always underlying stress with his health. Thank God, Shiva... and all deities!! :) that my other son is relatively healthy and only has anaphylactic allergy to peanuts and most nuts!! As for me, I was diagnosed with MS seven years ago, and so I take medication that makes me immuno-compromised. I am incredibly stressed ... juggling the many education platforms that my kids are using and their educational deadlines, the underlying health conditions of my family and now with the decisions that I need to make going forward with my kid's education. The school in my province will be opening up in June for one day a week.... I am currently weighing my option of homeschooling my children starting in September because if COVID is introduced to our family, it could

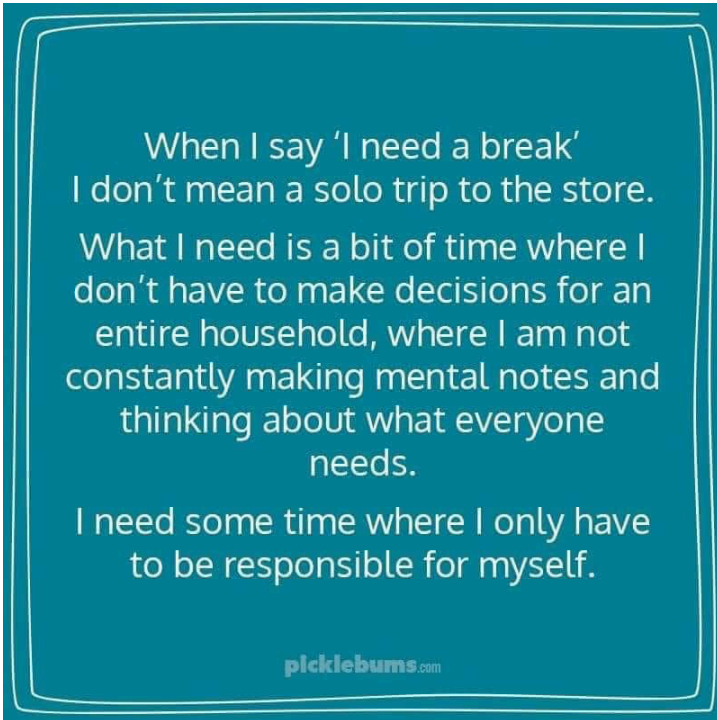
be fatal for my son and I. If I decide to homeschool, I will need to reduce my teaching load, which will mean a pay reduction and loss of employer-paid benefits. Because of my and my son's health conditions, I will be forced to take a sizable pay cut (so, a 25 per cent pay reduction plus now paying for extended medical premiums). There is so much injustice ... but maybe I should just focus on being thankful that I have a job! I experienced extreme work-family conflict. It is overwhelming, and perhaps sometime soon I will go on stress leave ... but this I fear would be too stressful!

I am a mother, grandmother, and educator. I'm juggling what I sometimes ... well, most times, feel is an unattainable workload. I have been raising our grandson for over five years. My partner left us after eighteen years of being together, two weeks before COVID-19 came into our lives. So now another ball has been added to my juggling act that emotionally, socially, and financially is taxing me to the limit. I'm trying to teach my seven-year-old (whose routines and home structure have been completely broken down) and [give] lessons to the nine classes that I teach. Then you throw in ... lawyers, social distancing, and isolation to boot. Sometimes I go to my room and sit on my bed and cry. I feel guilty because I feel I'm not doing a good job at anything because I'm spread so thin. On a positive note, I am fortunate and blessed to have a “village” of strong women and my family holding my head above water so that I don't sink.

I am a mother of two minions, who are four and two years of age. Been working from home and quarantined from the world for seven weeks now, and it is getting really hard to keep sane. I feel like I am just a few days away from a mental / emotional breakdown. I hope it doesn't happen but I sense it will.

My husband works in essential business and leaves in the morning to come back in the evening and helps out as much as he can during those limited hours. My mother is living with me for the time being and has been a great support in helping with my eleven-month-old. But I find it very difficult to manage my workload with home schooling, meal preparations, play time with the kids, and my nonstop conference calls. My daughter's iPad time has gone up, my productivity gone low and as a result I've totally deprioritized my health. Sometimes I just want to throw away my phone and laptop so I can breathe in peace without having calls and emails and messages to respond to! My support system (the nanny, daycare, school) has all fallen apart and I really don't know how long I can go on for.

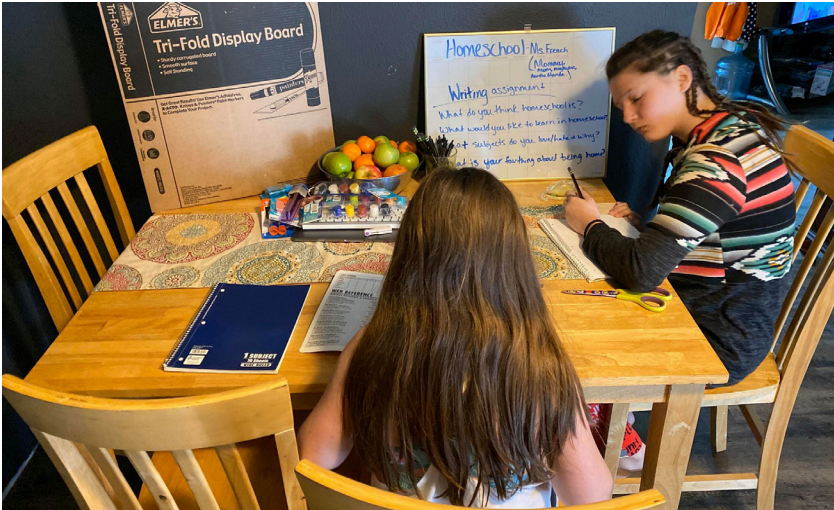
The mothers' comments poignantly capture the mental (over)load of motherwork in this pandemic: specifically the "third shift": the emotional and intellectual labour of mothering or what philosopher Sara Ruddick has termed "maternal thinking." Indeed, the mothers, as conveyed in the well-liked meme (see below) in the Facebook Group are overwhelmed by the demands of maternal thinking—the organizing, remembering, anticipating, worrying, and planning of motherwork—that have become amplified and compounded in the pandemic.



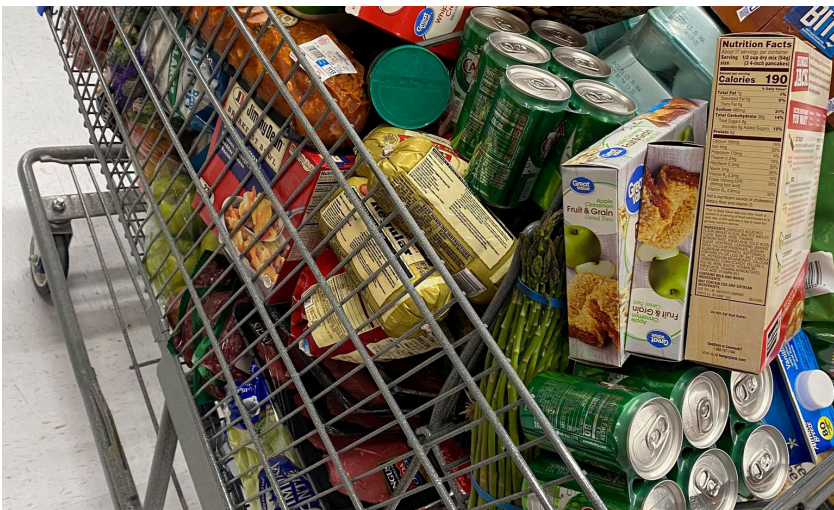
I conclude this section with some words and images (the later sent by the mother for this article) from Amanda French's poignant and powerful post "Sorry, I'm Just Tapped Out":

I said this to one of my kids' teachers this morning as she requested a private zoom with my child and I. At the same time as this, I had two other kids hopping on their Google Meets. I had to pull my oldest from her work to hold the baby; the kids' Dad had a call just starting, and as I struggled with my laptop to even find which godforsaken link I needed to even click, I was ready to crumble. The laptop wouldn't

connect to the Internet. The baby was fussing. My oldest was frustrated. I had to pull her from what she was in the middle of. I had noise coming from each room with all the kids trying to, you know, “school,” and it took every fiber of my being not to throw the laptop off the table.



I'm one person trying to juggle the schedule for five kids, and every day, I fluctuate between moments of having it together and seriously, well ... losing it. This isn't normal.



Any of it.

Trying to function in the “unfunctional.”

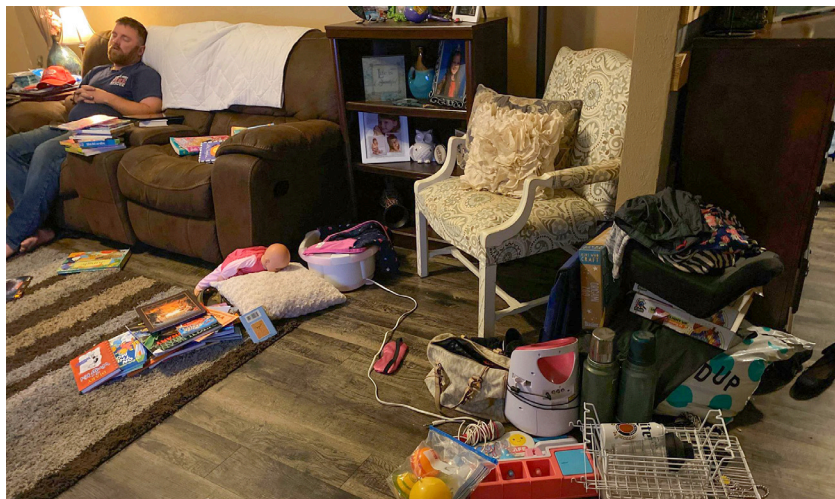
That’s the best way to explain all of this: trying to function in the unfunctional.

This all will be over soon. Right?

Or at least I keep telling myself.

This just isn’t normal.

Any of it.



We’re not supposed to be able to turn to our manuals of “living through a global pandemic and total, utter chaos” and just snap our fingers and handle this all with grace.

It’s impossible.

It’s okay to not love this time and feel okay or good about it in every hour of every day.

I can’t think about tomorrow or the next day or how I’m going to get through next week. I’m literally taking it one day at a time and focusing on surviving the next hour.

If you’re reading this and asking yourself how you can do it, well ... good news is, you already are.

It may not always be pretty, but you’re doing it.

There are crumbs on my counter.

The dishes need done.

The laundry needs switched.



The dog needs to go out.

The baby needs fed.

A kid needs help on their work.

There are massive bags under my eyes as if I haven't slept in twelve years.

I wore this outfit yesterday and to bed and today, which is now tomorrow.

Here we go.

We're freaking rock stars ... every single one of us



Conclusion: We Need to Be Talking about This

The pandemic has resulted in a greater appreciation for work that was little valued and poorly paid before the pandemic, such as social workers and retail workers. As a result, there have been calls for higher wages along with improved working conditions, but this sadly has not been the case for mothers and motherwork. No one is talking about mothers who—as evidenced in the Mothers and COVID-19 Facebook group—are “doing the impossible,” carrying “an unbearable load,” and “trying to function in the unfunctionable.” Nor are governments providing support for carework as they are for waged work. Despite the cataclysmic upheavals of the pandemic, one thing remains unchanged; mother work remains invisible, devalued, and taken for granted. “School closures and household isolation,” Lewis writes, “are moving the work of caring for children from the paid economy—nurseries, schools, babysitters—to the unpaid one.” Lewis goes on to ask: “What do pandemic patients need? Looking after. What do self-isolating people need? Looking after. What do children kept home from school need? Looking after. All of this looking after—this unpaid caring labor—will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structures of the workforce”. Andrea Flynn also observes the following in *Ms. Magazine*: “The coronavirus has laid bare many divisions in our society. And, like any serious crisis does, it has elevated the extent to which structural sexism permeates our lives: impacting the gendered division of labor within the home and also shaping what is possible for women, and particularly mothers, in the public sphere.” Relatedly the pandemic has also revealed what has been termed a “crisis in social reproduction”—the failure to recognize the value of motherwork and carework more generally. As Liza Featherstone explains “while capitalist profit-making is completely dependent on the essential work of caring for people, of keeping them alive and healthy—what the historian Tithi Bhattacharya calls ‘the processes of lifemaking’—it is also completely at odds with this labor.” Or as the most-liked meme in the Mothers and COVID-19 group succinctly states: The economy is not closed. Everyone is cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their loved ones. It’s just not valued by economists because it is normally unpaid women’s work.

**The economy is not “closed.”
Everyone is cooking,
cleaning and taking care of
their loved ones. It’s just not
valued by economists
because it’s normally unpaid
women’s work.**

To answer the repeated questions of the article—why is motherwork not recognized as an essential service?—I would suggest it is because, motherwork, does not, in the words of Marilyn Waring, count. But as the comments from the Mothers and COVID-19 Facebook group make compellingly and cogently clear mothering, in the words of Meg Luxton, is more than a labour of love, and in the context of a pandemic, it is a frontline essential service

This article is certainly not a final or definitive statement on Mothers and COVID-19. It draws upon only two weeks of mothers’ comments and references and only a handful articles that were available at the time of writing. It provides a snapshot of the care and crisis of mothers and mothering in this pandemic as well as a place to start for future research projects. I hope to develop and expand this study as the group grows and the discussions continue, with my emphasis more on academic members. But I do hope that the article helps to make visible what has become invisible and renders audible what has been silenced—the labour of motherwork under COVID-19—in order to inform, support, and empower mothers through and after this pandemic. As I conclude this article, the economy is slowly and cautiously opening where I live in Ontario, Canada. But most schools in Canada will remain closed until the fall, and children’s summer programs have been cancelled. For many mothers, this will likely present new and more difficult challenges, as they are required to return to the workplace without childcare. And in many countries, pandemic protocols are being reimposed after an increase in COVID-19 cases. It will be a long time before we return to normal—whatever that may be in a postpandemic world. Until then, we must continually and insistently ask why no one is talking about the care and crisis of mothers under COVID-19 and

demand that governments, the media, and the public begin this necessary conversation so that mothers are rightly recognized and supported as frontline workers performing essential service in this pandemic.

Work Cited

- Chemaly, Soraya. "Coronavirus Could Hurt Women the Most. Here's How to Prevent a Patriarchal Pandemic." *NBC News*, 10 Apr. 2020, www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-could-hurt-women-most-here-s-how-prevent-patriarchal-ncna1186581. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Daniel, Zoe. "How Coronavirus Has Changed the Roles in the Family Home." *ABC News*, 13 May 2020, www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-13/coronavirus-has-changed-roles-in-family-home/12239542?fbclid=IwAR1PRqB8h_4M0XGbu1zpGjUN5Zg89IXHavtHyRAC0trw4AVmckwG9DPyhVM. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Dunham, Jackie. "Women Disproportionately 'Bearing the Brunt' of Coronavirus Crisis, Advocates Say." *CTV News*, 22 Apr. 2020, www.ctvnews.ca/canada/women-disproportionately-bearing-the-brunt-of-coronavirus-crisis-advocates-say-1.4907309. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Featherstone, Liza. "The Pandemic Is a Family Emergency: How the Coronavirus Exposes a Crisis of Care Work." *New Republic*, 7 May 2020, www.newrepublic.com/article/157528/coronavirus-pandemic-family-care-work-crisis-social-reproduction-theory. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Flynn, Andrea. "The 'All-Consuming' Emotional Labor Caused by Coronavirus—and Shouldered by Women." *Ms. Magazine*, 31 Mar. 2020, msmagazine.com/2020/03/31/op-ed-the-all-consuming-emotional-labor-caused-by-coronavirus-and-disproportionately-shouldered-by-women/. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Gagne, Claire. "Why Is No One Talking How Unsustainable This Is for Working Parents?" *Today's Parent*, 24 Apr. 2020, www.todayparent.com/blogs/opinion/why-is-no-one-talking-about-how-unsustainable-this-is-for-working-parents/. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Lewis, Helen. "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism." *The Atlantic*, 19 Mar. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Luxton, Meg. *More Than A Labour Of Love: Three Generations Of Women's Work In The Home*. Women's Press, 1997.
- Majoo, Farhad. "Two Parents. Two Kids. Two Jobs. No Childcare." *New York Times*, 22 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/opinion/coronavirus-parenting-burnout.html. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Beacon Press, 1989. Waring, Marilyn. *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*. University of Toronto Press, 1999.