

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH CONTEXTUALIZATION

2.1 Social Construction of Idealized Motherhood

Motherhood has various social, cultural, and biological aspects. There are social and cultural definitions of what it means to be a good mother. In some cultures, good mothers are thought of as patient, nurturing, available, and involve themselves in their children's activities and decisions. In other cultures, a mother doesn't need to involve herself in every aspect of her children's lives in order to be considered a good mother. These cultural ideals are reinforced through the differing philosophies of child rearing. The authors of the study examined Dr. Spock's book because they believed that much of child rearing literature includes philosophies about motherhood. They believed some of the child rearing philosophies suggested that mothers need to rely on themselves for the answers, while other aspects suggest that mothers should adhere to the male-dominated norms of society." " Being a mother, according to popular culture, means that a woman must put her children before herself, and this, in turn, has biological and psychological effects on the mother. Rakow describes the image of the modern, 'good' mother, as one in which a woman is expected to invest her all, emotionally and psychologically, into the upbringing and daily care of her children. Within this philosophical framework on motherhood, the welfare of the child comes first, and the mother must make decisions based on what she believes is best for the child. This theory shows that society holds particular expectations of mothers and that, at times, unrealistically, a mother must make selfless and sacrificing choices.

This paradox also accentuates the disconnect between the cultural definition of motherhood and the actuality of motherhood. When the cultural notions of “ideal” motherhood fail to correspond with the embodied and actual experiences of motherhood, tension and disparity are created. Often, in the media and in popular culture, figures of motherhood are embodied by women who are happy and fulfilled in their roles as mothers. On the other hand, actual experiences of motherhood encompass a myriad of other feelings such as anger, sadness, anxiety, exhaustion and other physical pains. Oftentimes, the actual experiences associated with the role of motherhood are absent from the discourses surrounding and dominated by motherhood. (Lakämper, n.d.). Because of these Absolutes, mothers often surmise that they are the only ones who have experiences that are incongruent to the definition and the ideal of what motherhood is “supposed to be”.

This expectation can also create a gap between the cultural image of motherhood and the actual experience of being a mother. This tension as occurring when the embodied and everyday experiences of motherhood do not fully match the expectations created by dominant ideas of “good” motherhood. In popular culture, motherhood may be associated with happiness, fulfillment, and devotion, while real experiences can also include frustration, anxiety, pain, exhaustion, and uncertainty. These experiences are sometimes simplified or left out of dominant discussions of motherhood (Lakämper, n.d.). As a result, mothers may feel that their own experiences are different from what motherhood is supposed to look like. This gap is important because it shows that idealized motherhood doesn't only exist as an

external social standard; it can also shape how mothers understand and evaluate their own experiences.

Conceptions of children and childhoods inform ideas of successful motherhood. One example is how cultural ideas of childhood construct the stories mothers tell about their children with disabilities. Authors J. and P. Apgar, in *The Disabled Child: Memoirs of a Normal Future*, demonstrate how mothers often tell stories which project that their children with disabilities will one day be fully productive members of society, and thus have a “normal” future. These projections or expectations often frame the stories mothers tell about their children. From a theoretical framework on motherhood, the projections of the child on normality frame expectations on the parent. From a sociological perspective, it creates a parenting obligation to direct, control, and influence the child’s future, and ultimately, normalize that future. Thus, it is understood that many parents strive to raise children that can control, improve, and shape their own future, and influence society in the process.

More current data indicates that these kinds of assumptions and expectations persistently inform women’s perceptions about motherhood. From focus groups with 24 women from Australia, the researchers found women’s conceptualization of motherhood is formed by social and cultural constructions of femininity. From the focus groups, the participants described the idea of “good” motherhood as requiring women to renounce aspects of their identity to embrace their role as a mother. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by the physical and mental exhaustion from constantly providing care for children and being responsible for

the wellbeing of other family members. Overall, the study revealed that the origin of the expectations to embody “good” motherhood is from the social world, and women ultimately turn these expectations on themselves.

Ideals of motherhood are set by social and cultural norms and standards, which are largely unrealistic. A mother is expected to be selfless, constantly available emotionally and physically, and committed to improving and protecting her child’s interests. As a result, a mother’s frustration or anger and other emotions considered “negative” remain hidden. This study explores how women feel pressured to give up their individual identity and replace it with the social role of “mother.” Also, other studies discuss women’s inability to identify and express emotions associated with their experiences as women and mothers, primarily due to cultural standards and beliefs regarding the ideal mother figure.

Idealized motherhood is a set of standards and expectations that are learned or socialized as opposed to naturally or biologically derived. These teachings and expectations may come from various sources, including literature, social outings, and social discourses, and may be modified to suit specific social formations and cultures. These expectations may encourage mothers to develop and strengthen their children's well being while exposing mothers to self judgement for failure to meet the expectations of the 'good' or 'ideal' mother. In practice, it appears that mothers often experience 'real life' challenges of being a mother while taking on the expectations of the idealized 'good' mother. Prior literature contextualizes *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* as a representation of motherhood where "exhaustion, anxiety, responsibility and a fraught relationship with one's true self", are outcomes of

motherhood. Other chapters of this study examine representations, and artistic expression of the expectations of idealized motherhood in the film through Linda's character and other film elements.

2.2 Double Burden and Working Mother

The fact that more women have recently joined the workforce has raised questions regarding women's roles in the family. Women still face the same pressures to fulfill the domestic role and also to become the primary caretaker for the children. As if the burden of work and family wasn't enough, many women face what is known as the "double burden." The term is used to describe employment for pay and also the unpaid work around the home and family. Because a woman faces challenges in the workplace because of unbalanced family care work, the intersection of family and work is of high importance. Care work has long-term consequences on women's employment.

The double burden is made up of several components, with the most well known being the responsibility of paid work in addition to care work. However, this burden is made worse by the responsibility of unpaid household chores and care work. This has an impact on participation in the labor market and the number of hours worked. Samtleben examines these impacts using data from Germany. In unpaid care work and household chores, there is an inequitable burden on couples and an inequitable division of labor. Both of these contribute to an inequitable participation in the workforce and reduced hours worked by women. If couples

shared household chores more equally, women would be more likely to work and participate in the workforce.

How women reconcile work and care also shapes the kinds of work they do. Webber and Williams (2008) looked at 54 women who voluntarily worked part-time and analyzed how they integrated parttime work and motherhood. These women saw part-time work as the best option to balance paid work and care. The researchers noted that there were positive and negative consequences of part-time work for women and how it impacted gender equality. Negative consequences included the mother working in lower-paid and lower-status positions, and positive consequences were situations in which part-time work allowed mothers to better balance care and work. Overall, part-time work was better than fulltime work for better integrating family and work, but part-time work remained challenging.

Employment options chosen by women tend to be affected by the relationship between work and care. Webber and Williams (2008) conducted an analysis on 54 women who worked part-time. According to the study, the participants took up part-time work due to the negative impact that full-time work had on their duties as mothers. Flexibility offered by part-time work to incorporate other responsibilities improved women's sense of gender equity. This was, however, dependent on several contexts. Generally, part-time work is believed to help women reconcile work and care duties. The researchers concluded that although part-time work can improve gender equity, it has the potential to do the opposite.

The experience of working mothers is also impacted by their partner's willingly support system. Edwards (2006) describes a working mother's challenges

and stresses as a result of work-family conflict, and the consequences of the husband's inadequate support and help, and stressful beliefs, as well as the wife's inequitable share of housework and child care. The study shows supportive communication by husbands and the impact it has on employed mothers in coping with the conflict of integrating paid work and family commitments. From the results of the study, it can be concluded that stresses associated with working and being a mother can be managed if husbands take an active role in communicating support, and are involved in child care and house work.

The term 'double burden' is used to describe situations where working women experience a combination of paid and unpaid work and whereby the demands of both are neither integrated nor reconciled. Women often have responsibility for home and work; and if these are not coordinated, women will experience a disproportionate strain. As far as women's paid work is concerned, numerous studies have shown that family caring responsibilities can act as a barrier to women's labor market participation and can restrict the working hours of employed women. Concerning household and care work, Edwards' research has shown that when women do not have an equal partner to help them with household tasks and care, this can lead to stress and work/family conflict. Edelman and others have shown that the main reason why women experience more work/family conflict than men is because of the care responsibilities women have.

The double burden applies to societal perceptions of women, particularly with regard to motherhood. Historically, women have been seen as the primary caregivers. Consequently, women's employment does not remove the presumption

that they remain their families' caregivers. This means that, in many cases, women have an additional caregiving responsibility and an employment burden. Webber and Williams demonstrate the interrelated nature of paid employment and caregiving for women, particularly with regard to children. Samtleben focuses on the relationship between a woman's unpaid work and the constraints that exist for women in the workforce. These studies point to the fact that challenges facing women who perform a paid work role and a care work role are connected.

This study uses the term double burden to describe the context that informs the portrayal of Linda as a working mother in *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025). Linda is a working mother and a therapist. She has a chronically ill daughter and the film illustrates the situation where a woman is required to perform several tasks. These tasks may include some professional activities and intensive care work. The film depicts women in the workforce who also take care of children and other family members and shows the social context women may encounter. The context demonstrates that there are unequal expectations toward women in the workforce and society in general. This context informs and frames the following analysis which explores women's situations where they experience these expectations and responsibilities simultaneously through the illustration of Linda's condition.

2.3 Representation of Motherhood in Contemporary Film

Because of the ways that cinema conveys characters, dialogue and narrative, and utilizes various aspects of filmmaking from a visual style to other techniques and devices, films can construct and relay ideas and expectations about women and

what it means to be a mother. As Abbey claims, various cultural and media representations are central to our understanding of motherhood. Repeated normative and idealized representations of motherhood shape our collective perception of what is valued in mothering. Traditionally, women centered narratives of the popular culture of films and television, for example, have promoted women's self-sacrificing service, particularly as mothers. It is also in women centered narratives where we see women portrayed as irresponsible or bad mothers when they fail to give selfless service to their families.

The portrayal of mothers in film has historically been one-dimensional and simplistic. Abbey analyzes the representation of women in movies over various decades. In films produced in the 1970s and 1980s, she identified a pattern in which women who were financially and socially independent were unable to be defined as a good mother. In the films, women who worked outside the home, or who otherwise failed to fulfill their duties and responsibilities as a traditional wife and mother, were sometimes portrayed negatively. Conversely, women who devoted themselves entirely to their children, including women who became ill from extreme exhaustion and weakness as a result, were often considered a good mother. Society and the media, including motion pictures, perpetuate the idea that women are born to nurture, and that women have the obligation to sacrifice themselves entirely for their children.

Motherhood on screen has also changed with more representations being shown in different ways. The Routledge Handbook of Motherhood on Screen, states that the majority of motherhood representations showcase the idea of a "good" and

supportive mother figure (Liddy & Flynn, 2025). Representations of motherhood have begun to challenge and show critiques of the conflicting aspects of the maternal figure. These representations have begun showing the gaps, emptiness and exhaustion of motherhood. More representations have begun to depict maternal figures trying to find balance between their own personal identity and other aspects of their life along with their duties of motherhood. More critiques have challenged screen culture to break from the idealized and stereotypical representations of motherhood.

Of course, contemporary films retain the capacity to integrate traditional ideas of motherhood. However, they do so in contradictory ways. As these ideas illustrate, representations of mothers can incorporate contradiction. Motherhood is often thought of in terms of being loving and caring, and, in turn, exhausting. Mothers are thought to find fulfillment in their role. Motherhood is often pictured as selfless, and putting one's own needs last. In motherhood, and especially in on-screen motherhood, there are expectations. Film can be a space that represents the contradictions that motherhood embodies. It can help an audience consider what expectations exist around motherhood.

Accompanying the rise of maternal protagonists in literature and film has been the growth of narratives that explore the mother's point of view. Liddy and Flynn's research document that, in recent film and television, mothers and motherhood are portrayed in a complexity that was usually absent in earlier representations. Their chapter uses a cross-national, trans-industry, and inter-genre framework to illustrate different representations of motherhood and, in the process,

challenges the view that motherhood is a monolith. They interrogate the mother's social and psychological condition as a woman and her position within society. Their primary focus, however, is the relationship between the mother and child.

Other research (Berezhna 2023), looking at female protagonists in blockbuster films of the last two decades, shows similar patterns of multiple female character types and roles within mainstream movies. The study assessed films released between 1999 and 2023. From this research, representative female characters in mainstream movies of the last two decades included (but were not limited to) the following: the independent woman, the career-oriented woman, and the strong female lead. Additionally, the study identified a growing number of female characters in films that pursued social issues and feminism. The research confirms that contemporary mainstream films depict women in multiple ways. Therefore, in mainstream films of the last two decades, women are portrayed as mothers who nurture, as well as in other multiple facets as women with social goals and/or identities.

The acceptance and incorporation of multiple representations of contemporary film mothers indicate that motherhood in film is not synonymous with one figure. Traditional representations of mothers show them to be caring and selfless. More often than not, depictions of mothers in film confirm these societal expectations. In an attempt to move beyond these restrictions, post-1970s film mothers have attempted to address issues surrounding their lack of personal freedom and to explore psychological conflicts. Frustration, psychological distress and a longing for independence are some of the many problems experienced by

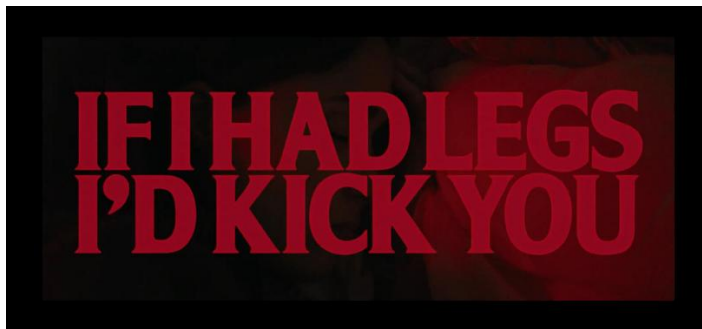
mothers that remain unacknowledged and unsatisfied due to social expectations placed on mothers to be selfless and caring.

This has particular relevance to the depiction of mothers in film who are employed or who care for children with special needs. Characters in these circumstances illustrate the feelings of a working mother about the lack of time and energy for her children. With regard to the working mother, Abbey contends that a mother has historically been judged when she has pursued a career or other interests. More recent film representations of mothers should explore and explain the motivations for maternal behavior to lessen the judgment of whether or not a mother is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother.

Images of motherhood in film change over time. Some more recent films show mothers as uncertain and exhausting, both to themselves and others. These films often show mothers who have unfulfilled desires and needs. Often, these films present a critical analysis of the mother’s situation without judging images of motherhood. While some images of motherhood, particularly in more recent films, present mothers as emotionally and physically drained, these images often do not challenge the notion of the perfect mother. They often show mothers feeling inadequate because of the stress and exhaustion of not being able to achieve the perfect standard of motherhood. It is the stress of not achieving this perfect standard that modern mothers often feel. One element of the research conducted on *If I Had Legs I’d Kick You* (2025) is that it, like several other more contemporary films, focuses on the physically and emotionally draining aspects of motherhood and

portrays the inner conflicts of being a mother. The next element of this research will be to explore the representation of Linda's motherhood in motherhood.

2.4 Film *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025)



Picture 2. 1 Movie Title

2.4.1 Overview of the film

If I Had Legs I'd Kick You is a 2025 psychological drama film written and directed by Mary Bronstein. The film stars Rose Byrne as Linda, alongside supporting cast members such as Christian Slater, Conan O'Brien, and ASAP Rocky. Blending elements of drama, dark comedy, and psychological thriller, the movie focuses intensely on the exhausting daily life of a mother pushed to the breaking point by personal and professional crises. Reviewers have heavily praised the film for its claustrophobic and realistic portrayal of maternal burnout. A very unique stylistic choice in the film is that the daughter's face remains hidden from

the audience until the very last scene. This ensures that the camera and the viewer attention remain entirely fixed on Linda's perspective and emotional state.

2.4.2 Synopsis of the film

The story follows Linda, a psychotherapist struggling to balance her demanding career with the constant care of her chronically ill daughter. Her unnamed daughter has a severe pediatric feeding disorder that requires a feeding tube and frequent hospital programs. Linda's husband, Charles, is largely absent due to his job as a ship captain, leaving her to handle the immense caregiving burden entirely alone. The situation worsens when their apartment ceiling collapses and floods, forcing Linda and her daughter to relocate to a rundown motel. At the motel, Linda deals with exhaustion, sleep deprivation from the noisy feeding pump, and quirky staff members. Meanwhile, her professional life falls apart as she deals with a hostile personal therapist and a troubled client who temporarily abandons a newborn in her office. Overwhelmed by mounting disasters and a complete absence of a support system, Linda spirals into a severe mental breakdown before finally reaching a quiet, fragile moment of clarity with her daughter on a beach.

2.4.3 Context of Motherhood in the Film

In *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You*, motherhood is depicted not as a natural, glowing experience, but as an endurance test and an infinity burden. The film actively challenges the "good mother" ideology discussed in previous sections by highlighting the crushing weight of intensive mothering. Linda is expected to be a selfless caregiver, a successful professional, and a patient partner, even though she receives absolutely no emotional or physical support from her husband or the

medical system. The director uses extreme close ups of Linda's face and heavy, stressful sound design such as ticking clocks and the constant beeping of medical equipment to make the audience feel her anxiety and claustrophobia. By deliberately keeping the daughter's face out of frame for most of the runtime, the film forces the viewer to focus on the mother's internal panic rather than just the sick child. Linda's journey perfectly illustrates the harsh reality of maternal vulnerability. It shows how societal expectations can push a woman to her breaking point when she is denied the space to be human, to be tired, and to ask for help.