

Early childcare crisis and social reproduction.

Insights from Eeklo, Flanders.

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Abstract

This study critically examines the acute shortage of early childcare services in Belgium, with a particular focus on Eeklo, a small city in Flanders that exemplifies the broader national childcare crisis. The analysis explores how this shortage disproportionately impacts women, framing the issue through the lens of social reproduction theory to elucidate the gendered nature of the problem. By applying this theoretical perspective in combination with qualitative research, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the systemic factors that contribute to the childcare crisis as a predominantly women's issue.

In Flanders, the shortage of affordable and accessible childcare has reached critical levels, placing significant strain on families, particularly on mothers who are often forced to navigate the impossible balance between work and caregiving. The situation in Eeklo is a microcosm of the broader regional and national issue, where limited childcare availability has exacerbated the social reproduction crisis, a crisis deeply rooted in traditional gender roles that disproportionately burdens women.

Through a series of qualitative interviews with mothers in Eeklo and a childcare center director, this study explores how the childcare crisis is not merely a logistical challenge but a profound societal issue linked to the undervaluation of caregiving labor historically associated to women. As the world transitioned through industrialization and into the era of neoliberalism, the economic landscape demanded that women enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Yet, even as they stepped into paid employment, the expectations of their traditional roles remained intact. The pressures mounted as the need for dual incomes became essential to sustain families, but society's support for caregiving did not evolve in tandem. The interviews expose the personal and professional consequences that insufficient childcare has on mothers, who are often compelled to reduce their working hours, accept lower-paying jobs, or exit the workforce entirely. This research aims to uncover why these struggles are predominantly women's issues, closely tied to the theory of social reproduction, which highlights how the burden of unpaid care work continues to fall overwhelmingly on women.

The study argues that the lack of early childcare services in Flanders, and particularly in cities like Eeklo, perpetuates the "motherhood penalty" where mothers face systemic disadvantages in the labor market due to their caregiving responsibilities. By highlighting the

voices of these women, the research sheds light on the urgent need for policy interventions that address the childcare crisis and revalue caregiving labor, advocating for a more equitable distribution of these responsibilities. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the social reproduction crisis and calls for transformative change to support women's full participation in both the labor market and society.

Introduction

In contemporary society, a woman with children is expected to embody multiple distinct roles, all of which are decided, shaped and constrained by the patriarchal capitalist culture in which we exist. A woman who chooses to have children must continue to function as a producer of goods and services and a wage earner, while also being subordinated to domestic labor and fulfilling the role of a "perfect" mother. The challenge of navigating the nursery school system when there is a early childcare crisis further complicates her situation and adds to the pressure a woman feels to make the "right" choices and meet all of the criteria by which society judges her. The root cause of why this problem primarily impacts mothers, and why is a mother's matter, is linked to the current societal view of women's role.

The intersection of social reproduction, the social reproduction crisis, and the pervasive myth of motherhood presents significant barriers to gender equality, particularly in the context of women's employment and career advancement. Social reproduction, which encompasses the unpaid labor involved in caregiving, child-rearing, and household management, is essential for the maintenance of society and the economy. However, this labor remains largely invisible and undervalued within capitalist structures, leading to what Nancy Fraser describes as a "crisis of care" under neoliberalism. As public support for caregiving services has diminished, women have increasingly borne the brunt of this crisis, with profound implications for their professional and personal lives (Fraser, 2016).

The social reproduction crisis is intimately connected to the myth of motherhood, a societal construct that idealizes women as natural caregivers, responsible for the emotional and physical well-being of their families. This myth reinforces traditional gender roles and perpetuates the expectation that women should balance work, professional advancement and family life without adequate support. Arlie Hochschild's concept of the "second shift" encapsulates this phenomenon, where women, after completing a full day of paid work, are

expected to undertake a second, unpaid shift at home, managing household tasks and caring for children (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). This dual burden contributes to chronic exhaustion and limits women's capacity for career advancement, as their time and energy are disproportionately consumed by caregiving responsibilities. Driven by a desire to serve as role models for their children and fulfill the myth of motherhood, often mothers take a "third shift" on pursuing professional and educational qualifications and have to deal with the multiple barriers that an unprepared society poses on them, such as limited access to affordable childcare, inflexible educational programs, and societal expectations that prioritize family responsibilities over personal development (Duffy & al, 2015)

Moreover, the "motherhood penalty" exacerbates the challenges faced by women in the workforce. Research shows that mothers are systematically disadvantaged in the labor market, facing lower wages, reduced opportunities for promotion, and pervasive biases that question their commitment to their careers. Sociologist Michelle Budig has documented how the wage penalty for motherhood remains a significant factor contributing to the gender pay gap, as mothers are perceived as less competent and less dedicated compared to their childless counterparts (Budig & England, 2001). This penalty is directly linked to the social reproduction crisis, as the lack of accessible and affordable childcare forces many women to reduce their working hours, accept lower-paying or part-time positions, or even leave the workforce altogether.

The significance of these issues is further highlighted in recent studies that delve into the lived experiences of maternal workers struggling with inadequate childcare. Gornick and Meyers (2003), in 'Families That Work', provide a comparative analysis of how national policies around parental leave and childcare affect gender equality in countries such as the United States, Sweden, France, and Germany, showing that robust childcare support is essential to mitigating the motherhood penalty and enabling women to maintain full-time employment. Misra, Budig and Boeckmann's (2011) research on cross-national employment patterns, conducted in countries like the United States, Sweden, and Germany, underscores the impact of childcare availability on women's labor market outcomes, highlighting how limited support exacerbates gender disparities in employment. Additionally, Damaske's (2011) study on working-class and middle-class women in the United States reveals how inadequate childcare forces many women, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to leave the workforce or accept lower-paying jobs, thereby deepening the motherhood penalty. Moreover, Sharon Hays' (1996) 'The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood' examines how societal expectations of "intensive mothering" in the United States pressure women to prioritize

caregiving over their careers, further entrenching the social reproduction crisis and motherhood penalty.

In what follows, this study seeks to build on this body of literature by exploring the intricate connections between social reproduction, the social reproduction crisis, and the myth of motherhood, focusing on how these forces shape women's employment trajectories and career outcomes in times of early childcare services crisis. Then, through qualitative interviews with women across various sectors, the research aims to shed light on the lived experiences of those navigating the dual pressures of work and caregiving. Specifically, the study examines how the absence of early childcare exacerbates the second shift and intensifies the motherhood penalty, leading to long-term career stagnation and financial insecurity. In doing so, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the systemic challenges that women face and underscores the urgent need for policy interventions that address the social reproduction crisis and support women's full participation in the labor market.

Social Reproduction

In this article, social reproduction theory is intended as a framework for understanding how social inequalities are perpetuated through generations, particularly focusing on the role of institutions such as childcare, family and the labor market. The notion of social reproduction is generated by both Marxist and feminist theories, encompassing a broad range of essential activities and processes required for maintaining and reproducing life beyond mere biological reproduction, including unpaid domestic and care work, reproductive labor and affective labor (Kotiswaran, 2023). To better understand this broad range of activities, in this article we will use the so-called "third person" criterion; if a third person could hypothetically be paid to do the activity, it is considered social reproduction work. Cooking, cleaning, childcare, laundry, walking the dog and gardening are therefore all examples of unpaid work central to the reproduction theory (Wood, 2010).

In Marx's theory, every system of production involves both the production of the necessities of life and the reproduction of the tools and labor power necessary for production. Therefore, for any social formation to be continuously sustainable, it must constantly reproduce the conditions on which it depends: the conditions of production. Although the significance of reproductive labor was acknowledged in his writing, it was not deeply delved (Marx and Engels

1969, 31). The absence of further investigation and recognition has been extensively discussed by modern feminists due to its failure to consider the value generated by domestic labor, primarily performed by women, as a vital aspect of capitalist economies (Vogel, 2000).

Feminist theories acknowledge how unpaid domestic labor perpetuates women's oppression, confining them to subordinate roles and limiting their economic independence (Bhattacharya, 2017; Della Costa and James, 1972; Federici, 1976, 2004, 2012; Fraser, 2016; Glenn, 2010; Kotiswaran, 2023; Vogel, 2000). Unpaid domestic work is essential for capitalism, as it reproduces the labor force at no cost to capital and this work has been imposed on women and transformed into a "natural attribute" instead of being recognized as a social contract precisely because it was meant to be unrecognized and unpaid labor (Federici, 1976). For the capitalistic society a clear separation between productive labor (paid work typically associated with men) and reproductive labor (unpaid work typically associated with women) is necessary to maintain a stable order by exploiting the undervalued and invisible women's labor (Glenn, 2010)

Della Costa and James (1972) expanded on Marxist feminist ideas about the significance of women's unpaid domestic labor in maintaining capitalist social relations by emphasizing the critical role that women's domestic work plays in the functioning of capitalism. According to them, the restriction of women to the domestic sphere and their exclusion from paid employment benefits the capitalist system by providing the workforce at a minimal cost to the capitalist class, as women's unpaid labor in the home ensures the reproduction of the labor force.

In this society women are traditionally considered primary caregivers and play a crucial role in social reproduction, as noted Silvia Federici's seminal work "Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation" (2004). This work delves into the critical analysis of how women's unpaid labor has sustained the capitalist economy and how societal structures have perpetuated this dynamic. Federici further expanded Marx's concept of primitive accumulation to include the systemic oppression and control of women's labor and bodies by arguing that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was not just an economic transformation, but also a gendered one, where the social order was restructured to harness and exploit women's reproductive labor (Federici, 2004).

Bhattacharya (2017) further demonstrated how social reproduction is crucial in ensuring a consistent supply of labor within capitalist economies and serves as a vital mechanism for maintaining the stability and expansion of these economies. This is because it ensures the availability of a skilled and educated workforce that can sustain productivity and contribute to economic growth. Once again, the division between productive labour and non-productive

devalued reproductive labor, making it invisible within the formal economy despite its essential role in sustaining the workforce and, by extension, capitalism itself (Bhattacharya, 2017).

In her collaborative work "Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto" with Cinzia Arruzza and Nancy Fraser, Tithi Bhattacharya (2019) delved deeper into the oppression of women in capitalist societies. This manifesto highlights the intersectionality of gender, race, and class on women's oppression, while also shedding light on the crucial function of social reproduction, which is systematically devalued by capitalist economies.

In an interview conducted by Sigrid Vertommen, author Tithi Bhattacharya argues:

"We have to move away from the commonly accepted understanding that capitalism is just an economic system. Capitalism is not just a mode of production but a set of social relations. That is exactly what we want to emphasize in the book. Capitalism means exploitation and extraction of surplus value, but also domination, alienation and oppression. If we see capitalism as just an economic story, then our story stops at the factory, the farm, the company or the office, in other words, at wages and profit" (Bhattacharya and Vertommen, 2018).

By acknowledging and addressing the centrality of social reproduction labor in capitalism the authors advocate for actions aimed at dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate inequality and work towards a more just and equitable society. To effectively deconstruct these oppressive structures and establish a more equitable society, it is crucial not only to recognize and address these interconnected issues but also to actively pursue solutions that promote diversity, inclusion, and social justice. This necessitates a unified effort from individuals, communities, and institutions to challenge and transform the systems and attitudes that perpetuate inequality (Arruzza, Fraser and Bhattacharya, 2019).

Crisis of social reproduction

In light of changing social and economic conditions that demand dual-income households, the social reproduction system is facing a consistent crisis, and the lack of childcare services is just one of them. Capitalism inherently creates conflicts between the demands of capital accumulation and the requirements of social reproduction, leading to recurring crises that affect both economic systems and the fabric of society (Fraser 2016). The significant

consequences of undervaluing and exploiting reproductive labor are evident in the destabilization of contemporary societies. The conversion of crucial services into commodities, the erosion of social welfare systems, and the growing uncertainty of employment have collectively heightened this crisis, imposing a substantial burden on individuals, particularly women, who are expected to bear the responsibility for caregiving and domestic chores (Federici 2020).

As previously pointed out, social reproduction labor plays a critical role in capitalistic societies. Neoliberal capitalism, with its focus on deregulation, privatization, and austerity, has intensified the pressure on social reproduction, resulting in a care crisis characterized by the diminishing capacity of families and communities to provide care, alongside insufficient state support and market-driven solutions that often exacerbate inequalities (Harvey, 2007). The increased participation of women in the workforce has been both a cause and a result of changes in the way care is provided (Fraser, 2016). As more women enter the workforce, traditional gender norms that restricted women's participation in the labor market are being challenged, leading to a reevaluation of the division of labor within households and communities. This brings to a rise in the demand for paid care work, often performed by marginalized groups, such as immigrant women and racial minorities (Glenn, 2010; Davis, 1981)

The crisis of social reproduction comprises a multifaceted array of issues that encompass the social, economic, and political dimensions of care as well as the ways in which these factors intersect to produce a fragmented and often inadequate care system (Razavi, 2007). Recognizing that care, typically viewed as a private and familial responsibility, is in reality a critical public concern that demands a comprehensive and equitable approach, became a central focus of academic discourse as the challenges and inequities inherent in care provision have become increasingly apparent. This shift in perspective has mainly been driven by feminist and human rights movements, which have drawn attention to how the unequal distribution of care responsibilities disproportionately affects marginalized communities, particularly women (Glenn, 2010).

In Nancy Fraser's article "Contradictions of Capital and Care" (2016), she investigates the interconnected crises of capitalist economies and social reproduction. According to Fraser, capitalism consistently generates conflicts between the demands of capital accumulation and the requirements of social reproduction, leading to recurring crises that impact both economic systems and the fabric of society. This systemic crisis of social reproduction was even more clear during the Covid-19 pandemic (Stevano et al., 2021; Kienscherf & Thumm, 2024). The pandemic has not only intensified the centrality of households in welfare provisioning but has

also made the labor of social reproduction more visible, with a disproportionate impact on gender, class, and race (Stevano et al., 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020). One of the key ways in which the pandemic has influenced social reproduction is through its impact on early childhood education and care as during this period the family has become the only institution of care. The shift to remote learning and the closure of childcare facilities have posed significant challenges for families, particularly for women, as they struggle to balance work and caregiving responsibilities (Kienscherf & Thumm, 2024)

The myth of motherhood

The role of women in capitalist society remains a contentious matter also when they decide to become mothers, due to the idealized and unrealistic expectations that society imposes upon them (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996). The complex and often contradictory nature of motherhood needs a distinction between the personal experience of motherhood and the societal institution of motherhood (Neyer & Bernardi, 2011). While the experience of motherhood can be fulfilling and empowering, the institution of motherhood often presents reinforced patriarchal control and limits on women's autonomy, this because the personal, intimate experience of being a mother is distinct from the institutionalized expectations and norms imposed by society (Rich, 1976). When motherhood is framed as “nature”, social motherhood, that is the care work done by mothers and the rearing of children, appears as women’s “natural” responsibility and at the same time as performed out of “natural” love (Federici, 2022; Eyer, 1996) Mothers should be dedicated, selfless, and primarily responsible for their children's raising, which perpetuates the myth of motherhood. The concept of intensive mothering implies that a mother's sense of self and value are inherently linked to her caregiving role (Hays, 1996). Even when a mother is an employed woman, after completing her formal workday she is expected to return home to undertake a "second shift" of unpaid domestic labor. This labor includes tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other household responsibilities, largely discussed in Social reproduction theories. Hochschild's (1989) research reveals that even in households where both partners are employed full-time, women tend to take on a larger share of domestic responsibilities, a phenomenon she coined as "the second shift". After a first shift of paid work and a second shift of unpaid domestic work, Hochschild's study lays the groundwork for understanding the concept of the “third shift”, the additional learning or skill development activities that individuals, particularly working mothers, engage in after

fulfilling their professional duties and household responsibilities. Feminist scholars highlight how the third shift for mothers is deeply rooted in the intersection of gender roles, education, and labor. Mothers often pursue education as a way to improve their socioeconomic status, but this pursuit is complicated by the simultaneous demands of paid work and domestic responsibilities (Duffy & al, 2015) (David, 2003).

As we see, the organization of family life constitutes a significant obstacle, if not the primary obstacle, to the realization of gender equity also in the workplace (Sherman, 2020). Compared to men, women spend at least twice as much time providing childcare and, as a result, experience a significant decline in work hours following motherhood (Sherman, 2020). This disparity in unpaid domestic labor not only poses a barrier to women's professional advancement but can also serve as a model for gender roles that children internalize (Croft et al., 2014). Women, even who work for the same duration as their husbands in the office and contribute equally or more to the financial status of the family, often take most of the shares of childcare responsibility and domestic work (Maji, 2019). While there have been positive shifts, with men taking on more housework and women spending less time on it, the gender gap remains significant (Bianchi et al, 2000).

Hence, mothers often are living a penalized social situation, as they are expected to balance both paid employment and unpaid domestic responsibilities, facing a dual burden that often results in significant professional sacrifices. The concept of 'motherhood penalty' encapsulates a range of economic and professional setbacks, including lower wages, reduced opportunities for career advancement, and biased perceptions of competence and commitment (Buding & England, 2001). One of the primary drivers of the motherhood penalty is normative discrimination, whereby mothers are perceived as less competent and committed to their work compared to their non-mother counterparts (Benard & Correll, 2010). Studies have shown that mothers are often judged as being less dependable, less authoritative, and more emotional than non-mothers, even when they demonstrate equal or superior job performance (Correll et al., 2007). This perception of mothers as less capable workers can lead to a range of discriminatory practices, including lower starting salaries, fewer opportunities for advancement, and even difficulty in securing employment (Correll et al., 2007) (Kricheli-Katz, 2012). Rooted in traditional gender roles and societal expectations, the motherhood penalty is exacerbated by the demands of unpaid care work, which disproportionately falls on women.

The myth of motherhood highlight the persistent gender imbalance in the division of domestic labor, even in households where both partners are employed, confirming once again how the society sees women as the primary domestic care giver. This disparity not only affects

women's career advancement but also shapes the gender roles that children internalize, perpetuating the cycle of inequality (Croft et al., 2014). The next section reviews how these obstacle expectation about motherhood unfolds in the Belgian context (make a hinge between this section and the next one)

Childcare crisis in Flanders, Belgium

Overview

In the Flemish region of Belgium, childcare services for children from 0 to 3 years are organized under a mixed system of public, private, and subsidized private providers. The organization and regulation of these services fall under the jurisdiction of the Flemish government, specifically the Agency for Child and Family 'Kind en Gezin', which oversees the quality, accessibility, and affordability of childcare. The official provider can be daycare centers (Kinderdagverblijven), facilities that offer full-day care and can be either public or private or family childcare centers (Gezinsopvang). This type involves caregivers providing care in their own homes for small groups of children and can also be subsidized or non-subsidized. Belgium confronts significant obstacles in its early childcare system, especially in the Flanders region where the actual coverage for 100 children from 0 to 3 years old is 44,22 % (Opgroeien, 2023). The crisis is characterized by a scarcity of childcare facilities, extended waiting lists, and disparities in access, which have extensive implications for families and gender equality. According to the *Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie* (Flemish Community Commission), the number of children on waiting lists for childcare slots has been growing progressively. As of 2022, approximately 18,000 children were on waiting lists for daycare spots in Flanders (VGC, 2022). The availability of childcare places is particularly limited in urban areas such as Antwerp and Ghent, where demand is highest (Kind en Gezin, 2023). In fact, in the Flemish Region there were just over 86,000 available childcare places in 2023 for just over 195,000 babies and toddlers (Vlaanderen.be, June 2024). The current crisis is fueled by several factors, such as demographic changes, policy inadequacies, and financial obstacles. Belgium has experienced a rise in birth rates and immigration, leading to a larger population of young children in need of care (Vanderbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Additionally, an increase in the number of women entering the workforce has led to a greater demand for childcare services. As the participation rate of women in the labor market continues to rise, it has become essential for working parents to have access to dependable childcare (Eurostat, 2021).

Accessibility is another major issue that fuels the crisis, with lower-income families and single parents facing greater difficulties in securing childcare spots due to cost and availability (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). The cost of early childcare in Flanders is influenced by various factors, including the family's income, the type of childcare center, and the location. Income-related childcare centers offer fees based on a sliding scale related to the family's gross income, while private centers charge fixed rates that can be significantly higher. Subsidized centers based on family's income can cost from 5 to 30 euros per day (full-time), while non-subsidized range from 28 to 32 euros (Kind en Gezin, 2024).

Gender employment gaps

Moreover, the lack of adequate early childcare services has profound impacts on various aspects of society, particularly on gender equality and economic participation. The inadequacy of childcare facilities has a disproportionate impact on women, who are typically seen as the primary caregivers, as it compels many women to cut back on their working hours, accept lower-paying and more precarious positions, or exit the workforce wholly (Meulders et al., 2015). The employment rate among women aged 25-49 without children in Belgium 2021 was almost completely closed, while with the arrival of children it begins to widen significantly, reaching -27.4% for women with 3 children. The age of the children also has a notable impact on women's employment, in fact women with children between 0 and 2 years old work on average 17.4% less than men (Statbel, 2021). Another of the notable employment gaps in Belgian society is the tendency to work fewer hours, according to Eurostat, as of 2020, approximately 45% of employed women in Belgium were working part-time. This is significantly higher than the percentage of men working part-time, which stood at around 11% (Eurostat, 2020). Also data from Belgian statistical office 'Statbel' indicates that in 2023, about 40,2% of women aged 20-64 in Belgium were engaged in part-time work, in contrast with 12,1% of men in the same age group were working part-time. But whether working part time is a choice or a necessity we can understand from the latest study on Work&training carried out by the Labour force survey (Statbel, March 2024). **When asked what the reason is for which participants work part-time, 25.8% of women indicated as a motivation the care for their children or other dependent relatives, against 10.9% of men.** Furthermore, 50% of women with 3 or more children are working part-time and the employment rate gap of the 25-49 year-olds between men and women with 3 or more children reaches 27 % in 2021.

In 2019, the percentage of part-time employment among women in Belgium was one of the highest in the EU, aligning with the broader European trend where part-time work is more common among women than men. (Eurostat, 2023). Working fewer hours can also result in earning less money (Budig & England, 2001), as evidenced by the actual gender pay gap in Belgium, which is 5%. Additionally, working part-time can exacerbate the gender pension gap, as women in Belgium, on average, receive 25% less pension than men (Van den Bosch K., 2024). The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reports that inadequate childcare facilities are a significant barrier to gender equality in the labor market, a study conducted in 2017 found that about 29% of Belgian women cite childcare responsibilities as a reason for part-time work, compared to only 4% of men. The inability to secure reliable childcare has economic repercussions, reducing household incomes and increasing reliance on social welfare systems and hindering upward professional mobility for women, since training and skills opportunities are reduced (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014).

Government interventions

The Flemish government has recognized the childcare crisis and has implemented several initiatives to address the issue, in fact the government has allocated funds to expand the number of childcare places, particularly in high-demand areas. The goal is to reduce waiting lists and make childcare more accessible to all families. Subsidies and financial support schemes have been introduced to make childcare more affordable for low-income families. These measures aim to ensure that cost is not a barrier to accessing quality childcare to improve the quality of childcare services are being implemented, focusing on staff training, facility upgrades, and standardized care practices. The Belgian government provides financial support to families to help cover the cost of childcare. The "Kind en Gezin" (Child and Family) agency offers subsidies to childcare providers, which helps keep fees affordable for parents. Also reforms to parental leave policies have been enacted to provide parents with more flexibility and support. These changes include extended leave periods and improved financial compensation, encouraging parents to balance work and childcare responsibilities more effectively (Belgian Federal Public Service, 2021). Another measure undertaken by the Belgian government is the Childcare Accessibility Act¹. It was introduced to ensure that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality childcare services. This

¹ https://www.mi-is.be/sites/default/files/documents/be_european-child-guarantee-action-plan.pdf

legislation mandates that childcare centers reserve a certain percentage of places for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Belgian Federal Public Service, 2020).

Critics and protests

However, the government has been widely criticized for its latest initiatives regarding the nursery school crisis, accused by parents' associations and nursery school employees of wanting to save on subsidies for families, fueling the already divisive and precarious current situation. De Kinderopvangzaak² is a coalition of 20 parent and nursery associations that collaborate to discuss and challenge the current regulations concerning access to and utilization of early childhood services. Currently, there is a petition against the latest government rules, implemented in May 2024, which prioritize places for working parents and families in difficulty. These new measures stipulate that parents who work at least 80% together or are enrolled in a vocational training course receive priority for nursery schools, but this significantly disadvantages parents who are inactive, work part-time, or are seeking employment (Kind en Gezin, March 2024). This has a particularly profound impact on women who mostly work in care sectors, where 90% of the places are part-time (Eurostat, 2023), and who often face the difficult decision of leaving their jobs due to these new rules. Additionally, before the implementation of the new rules, every childcare facility was required to reserve at least 20% of its places for families in vulnerable situations. With the new rules in effect, this number decreases to a maximum of 10%, and single parents or families with a low income will no longer be eligible for such places.

Another active petition to implement a "Marshall Plan" for the daycare sector known as "De eerste 1000 dagen"³ (The First 1000 Days), is a collective effort organized by parents and daycare workers to advocate for the recognition of the educational significance of the first 1000 days of a child's life. They are requesting structural changes in childcare that prioritize the needs of both the child and the parent, acknowledging the crucial role of childcare workers, and improving supervision and professional development opportunities for employees in the sector. Care workers have also actively protested against the government's recent measures that allow one worker to care for up to nine children (Kind&Gezin, March 2024). Under the hashtag "#9isteveel," several worker demonstrations have taken place over the past few years to demand

² <https://kinderopvangzaak.be/zaak/>

³ <https://petitie.be/petitions/een-marshallplan-voor-kwalitatieve-kinderopvang-32542360-9bae-47a2-acc6-1ea1153cc89e?locale=nl>

a reduction in the number of children assigned to each caregiver, actually 9 per caregiver (Kind en gezin, 2024), and to advocate for better working conditions.

As we see, the early childcare crisis in Belgium, particularly Flanders, presents significant challenges. In the following sections, we will delve deeper into the impact of the daycare crisis in Belgium on the lives of the participants in this study, as revealed through the results of the interviews.

Methods and fieldwork

This study was carried out in Eeklo, a small city located in the province of East Flanders, Belgium, with a population of approximately 20,000 residents. Despite its modest size, Eeklo offers a representative microcosm of the broader issues related to early childcare services in Flanders. Currently, several childcare services for children aged 0 to 3 are active in Eeklo. Eight daycare centers and three family care centers covering in total the 48.36% of the required places. (Opgroeien, 2023). Eeklo's challenges in providing sufficient early childcare services reflect a larger regional and national crisis, where demand outstrips supply, leading to long waiting lists and inadequate support for families. By focusing on Eeklo, the research delves into how these systemic issues manifested in a smaller urban context provide insights into the local implications of regional and national policies and the day-to-day realities faced by mothers. This focus on Eeklo allows for a detailed exploration of the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in a setting that, while smaller in scale, echoes the challenges found throughout Belgium.

In this study, various data collection techniques were employed to explore the situation of day care centers. Initially, online research was conducted on the official websites Opgroeien, Kind & Gezin, and Opgang Vlaanderen which provide official statistics, as well as local and national newspaper articles. This preliminary phase also included interviews with public servants working in nursery schools. Together, these primary and secondary sources confirmed the crisis in daycare centers expressed by long waiting lists, as noted in an article by "Het Laatste Nieuws" (Last news) in November 2023 where in one of the largest childcare center of Eeklo (Kinderlach) families have to wait more than one year to get a place for their children.⁴

⁴ <https://www.hln.be/eeklo/ook-in-eeklo-is-zoektocht-naar-kinderopvang-een-hel-aantal-plaatsen-daalt-voortdurend~a6338a39/>

Another step of the exploratory phase was the online groups activity in the city, primarily the Facebook groups "Eeklonaar," "Vragen in en rond Eeklo" (Questions around Eeklo), and "Ge zijt van Eeklo als" (You are from Eeklo if). In these groups, most of the discussions related to the words *crèche* (daycare center) or *kinderopvang* (childcare center) posted by parents searching for a daycare place for their children. In addition to advice on nurseries, there were extensive debates regarding the exasperating situation regarding services for children. Afterward, some mothers who requested information in the aforementioned groups were contacted to participate in the research, and added to others who had already been contacted through interpersonal channels.

The next phase included data collection using qualitative interviews. The mothers participating in this study are women between 29 and 53 years old who live in Eeklo or take(took) their children to the daycare in Eeklo. Almost all of them (5) work, while the others are looking for or cannot work at the moment. The interviews conducted below are a mix of unstructured and semi-structured interviews conducted in a face-to-face format or in a virtual format. Initially each interviewee was approached in an unstructured way, allowing them to familiarize with interview interaction. Next, the research extended into the private lives of the participants. Inquiring about personal decisions and aspects that are intimate in nature required sensitivity and the careful selection of questions that intersected the themes mentioned above, and it was crucial to avoid questions that might be perceived as threatening and alienate the participants (Russel, 2006). With some of the participants a semi-structured approach was then adopted, using an interview guide(see Annex 1). In some cases, the participants were provided with the guide to familiarize themselves with the line of questioning of the interview.

Conducting interviews in English posed challenges, as participants were not always comfortable discussing personal matters in a language they did not fully master. This discomfort led to the manual transcription of interviews, as recording was not feasible. Consequently, many interviews were conducted in an unstructured format to accommodate participants' sensitivities regarding the topics discussed.

In the following sections we will further analyze how the crisis of childcare in Belgium has impacted the lives of the participants of this study, in terms of personal development within society, family and work. We highlight the intersectionality between society's expectations regarding motherhood and social reproduction theory, analyzing the difficulties that the

participants encountered when they were confronted with the long waiting lists of childcare in Flanders.

FINDINGS

This section of the study is dedicated to interviews with a childcare director and mothers from diverse backgrounds to explore how the national issue of childcare availability is a main mothers' problem, highlighting the difficulties families encounter related to the decision-making process for childcare centers and the accessibility and availability of these centers. This analysis will show how these national and regional issues become personal challenges for mothers, affecting their career interruptions, limited employment opportunities, reduced earnings, financial security, and mental and emotional well-being. The following interviews highlight the intersectionality between family organization and social reproduction, emphasizing how the lack of early childcare services exacerbates the second shift, intensifies the motherhood penalty, and contributes to long-term career stagnation and financial insecurity, highlighting the need to rethink the relationship between work and care to promote gender equality and alleviate systemic burdens.

Griet is the director of one of the largest nursery in Eeklo. When asked about the waiting time in her nursery and the new government measures, she answers:

It depends if is part-time or full time. For now full time places are available from June 2025, for part-time February 2025. So can be up until 1 year or more. [...]The current measures on priority for working parents do not take into account all those families that may be in difficulty. Then 10% of places, that before have been 20%, must be given to families in difficult situations, I always try to help but with these rules it is difficult to be able to help those who need a center for their children to find a job, or to study [...] The government has decided to give priority to working parents because in this way they have to pay less subsidies; with the criterion of inkomenstarief (based on the incomes) parents have to pay based on their earnings, and therefore if two of them work the government has to pay less subsidies for them. This makes it very difficult for those families where the parents, or one of the parents, does not work, to get out of difficult situations. (May, 2024)

Griet's testimony played a crucial role in the preliminary stage of the study, as it not only showed the difficulties of early childhood services but also revealed the government's inconsistent interventions to address the existing crisis. By prioritizing families where both parents work, the government's policy exacerbates the difficulties faced by families where parents are unemployed or work part-time, leaving them in vulnerable situations.

Decision-making process

One of the key factors examined in this study is the decision-making process surrounding sending children to nursery school. The aim is to determine whether the use of a childcare service was planned by families in advance, during the pregnancy, or after the birth. Additionally, it was crucial to understand the reasoning behind sending a child to nursery school.

For us, having a crèche was a fundamental necessity, I had to return to my job (manager) as soon as possible and I was afraid of losing my job position. For this reason, we looked for a nursery from the beginning of the pregnancy [...] This was also suggested to us by the midwife during my first gynecological visit, she insisted a lot that we look for a center immediately because the situation in Eeklo is disastrous. (Stephanie, May 2024)

For us it was natural, as soon as we announced the pregnancy all our friends and relatives after congratulating us asked if we had already found a crèche for the baby (Sabine, June 2024)

For me it was a personal decision, my husband agreed even if I had decided to stay at home for a year or more. I decided to send Lukas to the crèche at one and a half years old, because I didn't know any other families with children and I wanted him to be able to socialize at least in kindergarten (Hava, June 2024)

Many participants found it a "natural" decision to enroll their child in a early childcare center, motivated by the need to rejoin the workforce and maintain their job and financial independence. Hava, a 28-year-old from Eastern Europe, offered a unique perspective. In her

home country, women are still prioritized in the domestic sphere without facing societal judgment, but in Belgium, she felt judged for not participating in the workforce.

I live a double judgment every day, from my family for having sent my now two-year-old son to the crèche because he was considered too young, and from Belgian neighbors, friends and acquaintances who do not look in a good way on a housewife. It is difficult sometimes... (Hava, June 2024)

While Belgian society is already grappling with the crisis of social reproduction and the contradictory demands of capitalist society, which wants women as workers while also relying on them as primary caregivers and therefore not giving access to the services they need, other countries that have more recently embraced capitalism may not yet have encountered such stark contradictions in the realm of domestic labor.

Childcare Availability and Accessibility

To explore the current situation regarding the crisis of daycare centers in Eeklo, participants were asked how much time they had spent looking for a daycare center and how long the waiting list was.

We immediately looked for a daycare center that gave us availability after a year [...] at the time I was only 3 months pregnant, so my son would start at 6 months and for my job it was already late. (Annalise, May 2024)

Unfortunately we had recently moved to Eeklo because we had bought a house, my daughter was already 5 months old and we had to wait 9 months for a part-time place in a private center [...] (Lena, July 2024)

All participants (7) had to wait at least 9 months for a place, confirming the current crisis of available places. Most participants looked for a nursery as soon as they found out they were pregnant, although many had to make adjustments regarding the location of the nursery (often far from home or work), the quality and/or the hours. All mothers were aware of the current situation regarding the lack of childcare services, and as a result, they quickly sought out an appropriate location. Additionally, some mothers, like Stephanie and Annalise, faced challenges

with the limited hours of nursery schools, which made it difficult for them to balance work and childcare responsibilities.

Career Interruptions and Limited Employment Opportunities

Most of the mothers interviewed were compelled to take career breaks or reduce their working hours due to the lack of reliable and affordable childcare. These interruptions often led to gaps in employment history, which in turn hindered career progression and re-entry into the workforce, as highlighted by some of the participants:

I had to leave my job because I had to return 3 months after my daughter was born, but the only childcare center I found offered availability after 1 year, when she would have been 6 months old [...] My job was shift work and did not offer availability to work less (Stephanie, May 2024)

Also many women transitioned to part-time employment to balance work and childcare responsibilities. However, the interviewees revealed that part-time roles typically offer lower pay, fewer benefits, and limited opportunities for career advancement. Six of the seven mothers interviewed currently work part-time, some by choice, others by necessity. Conversely, none of their partners work part-time.

After the birth of Jonas I understood that it was impossible to return to work full-time, for this reason I decided from the first weeks to ask for a reduction in hours and currently I work at 70% (Annalise, June 2024)

Another result of this research is the conditioning of mothers to accept jobs below their qualifications or with lower pay due to the need for flexible hours that accommodate childcare. This underemployment not only underutilizes their skills but also contributes to the persistent gender pay gap. In this part of the interviews, the shift between the structural issues of availability and accessibility of childcare services and how these have become priority issues for the mothers in this study was clear. The reference to social reproduction theory is especially evident when the mothers explain how "they" have had to personally adapt to the situation

created by the crisis of childcare services, as they are seen as the prime caregivers of their children.

Reduced Earnings and Financial Security

The research highlighted that career interruptions, part-time work, and underemployment significantly reduced women's lifetime earnings, affecting their long-term financial security. This, as we have seen previously, also led to lower retirement savings and diminished Social Security benefits. Louise (52) is a divorced woman with 3 children, who now finds herself in a precarious situation due to the fact that she has worked part-time for almost two decades for family needs:

I worked part-time because with 3 children it was not possible to reconcile everything [...] now I find myself with little savings, no career, and a minimal pension waiting for me (Louise, May 2024)

As we can see, the lack of access to early childcare further exacerbated the gender pension gap, as women are often confined to lower-paying jobs with fewer opportunities for raises and promotions. Mothers who took time off or worked reduced hours for childcare missed out on crucial opportunities for networking, skill development, and professional growth, which are essential for career advancement. The findings also pointed to bias and discrimination in the workplace, where employers often perceived women with caregiving responsibilities as less committed or available. This led to biased decisions in hiring, promotions, and assignments, further stalling their career progress.

I had 2 children in a short time [...] at work I was no longer considered an 'important' worker because I was absent for a long time due to my pregnancies. I then had to work part-time and when I applied for an important position I felt a lot of resistance and a lack of trust in me (Sabine, July 2024)

Mental and Emotional Well-Being

The study also indicated that the challenge of organizing family life, work and childcare responsibilities caused heightened stress levels among women. Concerns about their children's well-being, coupled with work demands, negatively impacted their mental health. As previously mentioned, statistics on the employment gender gap show a nearly equal situation between women and men without children. However, the gap widens as more children arrive. In these circumstances, the mothers in this study felt "betrayed" by society. After years of study and/or work and consolidated personal independence, they found themselves having to fight to maintain what they had achieved with so much sacrifice. Meanwhile, in most cases, their partners continued their working life as before, even with significant career implications.

Becoming a mother transformed me, I was no longer the woman I had been before. Not only for the change that my daughter brought, but also for what I had to give up [...] Brams, my partner, also received promotions during these years. On the one hand I was happy, on the other I felt that an injustice had been done to me. (Sabine, July 2024)

Ellen, one of the mothers participating in this study, is a physiotherapist at Eeklo Hospital 'AZ Alma' and works in the department of the 'Pijnkliniek' (pain clinic). From her experience she confirms that most of her patients are women, and very often they are mothers. In this department of the hospital, chronic diseases related to pain complaints from the neck and back region are treated by a multidisciplinary team. She confirms that the social pressure placed on mothers very often leads to chronic disorders that they treat in their department. Combining work and children is a problem that periodically affects her too:

I had to reduce my working hours and my career ambitions, and completely give up my career as an independent professional. Once they (the children) are grown up I really hope to be able to start over and get myself back. (Ellen, June 2024)

The research also uncovered that many women experienced feelings of guilt for not being able to perform optimally at work or at home, bringing us back to the myth of motherhood where mothers are required to be optimal both during their first shift into the official labour market, at home during their second shift into the duties of domestic labour, and often also during their third shift trying to obtain the qualifications necessary to excel in their role as a woman and a

mother. This societal pressure to excel in both domains led to increase of personal dissatisfaction and decreased of job satisfaction.

Possible solutions

During the interviews, participants have proposed several solutions to address the childcare crisis and alleviate the associated challenges for working mothers. Participants suggested that the government should provide more substantial subsidies to reduce the cost of childcare for families. Additional funding could support the expansion of existing childcare centers and the establishment of new facilities, particularly in underserved areas where some of them use to live. Participants suggested also that employers should offer more flexible work arrangements for both parents, such as remote work options, flexible hours, and job-sharing opportunities. These measures would help them better balance their work and caregiving responsibilities. Expanding and improving parental leave policies was another of the key recommendation emerged from the interviews. Participants advocated for longer and more flexible parental leave options that could be shared between parents, thus promoting a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities. Raising public awareness about the importance of childcare and advocating for cultural change regarding gender roles were seen as essential. Participants emphasized the need to challenge stereotypes and promote shared responsibility between partners.

It must be seen as a job to be shared between parents, not taking for granted that the mother is the first caregiver. Every day I ask myself how to achieve a balance between being a mother and being myself. To be able to do everything well, you need help and sharing, you can't do everything alone. (Lena, July 2024)

Conclusion

This article explores how the lack of early childcare services is primarily a women's issue, how it impacts their life and how it perpetuates the social reproduction paradigms. The interviews with mothers from diverse professional backgrounds reveals the profound and far-reaching impacts of inadequate early childcare on women's careers, financial stability, and well-being. The narratives shared by participants in Eeklo paint a stark picture of the systemic

challenges that Belgian women face, particularly in the context of social reproduction—the process by which society ensures the care and maintenance of its members.

The study highlights that the lack of accessible childcare has precipitated a crisis in social reproduction, disproportionately burdening women with the dual responsibilities of paid work and unpaid caregiving. This burden not only impedes their career progression but also entrenches gender inequalities both within the household and the broader labor market. Many women reported feeling trapped in a cycle of underemployment or were forced to accept part-time or less demanding roles to manage their caregiving duties. This led to a significant loss of potential income, professional development opportunities, and long-term career growth. The stress associated with balancing these responsibilities also manifested in reports of mental health struggles, and strained personal relationships.

The interviews underlined that the crisis of social reproduction is a critical, yet often overlooked, driver of gender inequality. The absence of reliable childcare not only exacerbates the gender wage gap but also limits women's economic independence. Women frequently described how their inability to fully engage in the workforce perpetuated traditional gender roles, reinforcing their dependence on male partners and limiting their decision-making power within their families. This dynamic perpetuates a vicious cycle of inequality, as the economic disadvantages faced by women ripple out to affect their children and communities, thereby sustaining broader societal inequities.

The study's findings point to an urgent need for systemic change. The participants consistently expressed frustration with the lack of institutional support and highlighted the inadequacy of current policies to address the complex needs of working families. The latest Flemish government initiatives not only fail to address the root causes of the crisis but also exacerbate existing gender inequalities by reinforcing the traditional link between caregiving and work, particularly for women. Giving priority to working families means isolating and hindering all other families, especially mothers who have had to leave work or reduce their working hours due to the crisis in daycare centers. The participants called for comprehensive reforms, including increased public investment in affordable, high-quality childcare, flexible work arrangements, and stronger protections for working parents. The interviews also revealed a strong demand for policies that recognize the value of caregiving work and seek to redistribute its burdens more equitably across society.

Moreover, the study argues that addressing the childcare deficit is not just a matter of individual welfare but a critical step toward resolving the broader crisis of social reproduction. Without intervention, the continued strain on women's time and resources will perpetuate a

cycle of inequality that undermines economic growth and social cohesion. Policymakers must recognize that accessible childcare is a foundational element of a just and equitable society, enabling women to participate fully in the workforce and reducing the gendered division of labor that drives so many of the disparities observed in this study.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms the centrality of early childcare services to gender equality and calls for urgent action to address this critical gap. By investing in childcare and recognizing its role in supporting both social reproduction and economic productivity, Belgian society can take significant strides toward closing the gender gap and fostering a more inclusive and equitable future.

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