



## Media Image of Mothers and Motherhood on the Online Parenting Website mama:Du

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**ABSTRACT:** The media play a significant role in promoting a new model of motherhood, observed in social life in Poland. The aim of this article is to reconstruct the media's portrayal of motherhood and maternity. The research material comprises titles and leads of press articles published on the online website mama:Du. The methodological foundation is drawn from the premises of cultural linguistics and the processes of concept profiling. The research material distinguishes profiles such as a suffering and exhausted mother, a single mother, an independent mother, a (non)working mother, and a mother as a woman. Analysis indicates that despite changes in

the social perception of a woman's role, the website presents a unidimensional image of motherhood, reducing women to the mother-child dyad. This image aligns with the stereotype of the mother as a caregiver. However, there are sparse signals of overturning these prevalent stereotypes in texts showcasing mothers who call for alteration of established norms. Nevertheless, the feminine aspect of a mother, as a woman who takes care of herself and has her own interests beyond caregiving duties, remains invisible. Thus, the medium reflects a realistic, consistent with Polish realities portrayal of motherhood and maternity, gradual striving towards its transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** media image, social role, parenting journalism, cultural linguistics, concept profiling.

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## 1. Introduction

The role of mother is one of the most important roles a woman plays in her life. In Polish culture, this role is particularly valued and at the same time subject to strong stereotyping, just like the word *mother* (in Polish *matka*) (*mum*—in Polish *mama*) itself. Although in the Polish linguistic image of the world the axiological position of the mother is defined by family, national and religious traditions, “Mother [...] is a concept [...] based on a universal experiential base that is common to many cultures and languages” [Bartmiński 2008]. The word *mama* is more often combined with terms valued positively: *mama* can be *good*, *gentle*, *caring*, *nurturing*, *tender*, and *happy*. The adjectives: *neglectful*, *bad*, and *toxic* will be combined with the form *matka* [WSJP PAN]. However, it should be noted that the word *matka* in Polish language dictionaries is a neutral and basic form; the word *mama* is an inflection, a diminutive or a colloquial variant of the word *matka* [USJP]. For this reason, in this article I will use the form *mother* (*matka*) rather than *mum* (*mama*). The distinction between the axiological character of the two lexemes is based solely on colloquial rationality.

The study is based on the resources derived from the content include in the parenting website *mama:Du*,<sup>1</sup> being part of the Group: Na Temat.<sup>2</sup>

Although many other parenting websites can be found on the Internet, Group: Na Temat was the first to create two separate websites for mothers and fathers.<sup>3</sup> They are clearly distinguished and have their own logos (figure 1 and figure 2).

Both the *mama:Du* (hereafter: MD) and the *dad:Hero* (hereafter: DH) websites aim at young and educated readers from large cities. It can therefore be assumed that this is an audience that wants to create a new parenting model.

I limited the research material to the titles and leads of texts published on the MD website over a six-month period (October 2022—March 2023). During this period, 1395 texts were published on the MD website.

1 This article follows up on the analysis of the media portrayal of parents in the Group's parenting websites: Na Temat—dad:Hero i mama:Du: Trysińska in print a, in print b.

2 Group: Na Temat—available online since 22 February 2012, a Polish multi-topic website with a liberal profile founded by Tomasz Lis; publisher of: the business and innovation website INNPOLAND, the satirical ASZdziennik and parenting magazine *mama:Du* (since September 2014), as well as the lifestyle portal for fathers *dad:HERO* (since October 2019).

3 Other most visited news websites include Onet Rodzina, which has separate websites for mothers and fathers: *Strefa mamy* (the Mum Zone) and *Strefa taty* (the Dad Zone). *Wirtualna Polska*, on the other hand, runs the WP Parenting website, where we can find only *Strefa Mamy* (the Mum Zone).


 The logo for 'mama:Du' features the word 'mama' in a lowercase, bold, black sans-serif font, followed by a blue colon and the word 'Du' in a larger, bold, black sans-serif font.

Codzienny magazyn świadomego rodzica

Fig. 1. mama:Du logotype

Source: <https://mamadu.pl> [accessed: 11 July 2024].


 The logo for 'dad:HERO' features the word 'dad' in a lowercase, bold, black sans-serif font, followed by a blue colon and the word 'HERO' in a larger, bold, black sans-serif font.

Fajnie być tatą

Fig. 2. dad:Hero logotype

Source: <https://dadhero.pl> [accessed: 11 July 2024].

The title and the lead are the two most essential components of any journalistic text. The title, which is visible on the homepage, is meant to encourage people to click through and read the whole text. It is a magnet to attract potential readers [Żydek-Bednarczuk 2005: 172]. However, before the reader decides whether or not to take the time to read the whole thing, they are introduced to the lead, which primarily has a persuasive function. It also tells the reader what the text is about, but does so only minimally. Above all, it is meant to arouse curiosity and encourage reading. Given the key function of titles and leads in the creation of a press text, it can be assumed that they play an important role in forming a media image of mothers and motherhood in the minds of the audience. They draw attention to what—from the point of view of the media content provider—is/should be important in the lives of potential readers of the site. Indeed, the media influence not so much people's opinions as their lines of thinking, because they stimulate curiosity.

I make use of the assumptions underlying the content analysis methodology at semantic (evaluative) and pragmatic levels. The study is qualitative in nature. The methodological basis is the assumptions of cultural linguistics, which examines the four-part relationship: language—culture—man (society)—reality [Anusiewicz 1994: 10]. Through the analysis of language, it is possible to reconstruct a particular way of perceiving, interpreting and also creating the world. This is particularly important in relation to media texts, which, through the media images of the world created, are able to influence audiences and induce them to adopt certain attitudes. Similar to Danuta Kępa-Figura and Paweł Nowak, I perceive the media images of the world as a specific transformation of the linguistic image of the world [Kępa-Figura, Nowak 2006].

Several profiles can be distinguished in the material analysed to define both mother and motherhood. They serve as a key categorisation function. I refer here to the process of cultural and textual profiling of concepts [Tokarski 1998]. These two types of profiling make it possible to reconstruct the media image of the analysed concept in accordance with the culturally conditioned experiences of a specific linguistic community and in connection with the text-forming operations taking place in a specific text. Indeed, a word used in a text is a selection of some part of the overall semantic structure of the word.

While culturally profiled meaning is thus an ideal structure, abstracted from many real-world contexts and subjected to the researcher's introspection, the effect of textual profiling is to bring a subset of this structure to the forefront, recognising it as more significant from the perspective of the goals or intentions underlying the text. [Tokarski 2014: 244–245]

According to the website's assumptions, the title "tender mother"<sup>4</sup> is a woman who: takes care of her child and herself, is wise, aware, curious about the world, catches trends, is adept at new technologies and social media—on Facebook and Instagram, educated, fashionable, ambitious and brave; a woman who: is not afraid to ask difficult questions about love, relationships or sex. She confronts taboo topics, speaks up in the most important discussions and provokes them herself.<sup>5</sup> These are desirable characteristics of the modern mother, whereby revealing a change in the understanding of motherhood. Sociologists of the family draw attention to the adoption by women of a new strategy for fulfilling the role of mother:

The transformations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have brought about a very clear transformation of the model of performing the role of mother. Emancipation processes have freed women from the constraining corset of socio-economic and educational conditions, bringing about a change in their position in the space of marital and family life. [...] The traditionally defined role is no longer sufficient for a woman to achieve full life satisfaction. For this, she also needs a satisfying role as a woman who can pursue her plans, dreams and assignments in accordance with her informed predispositions to various roles, not necessarily the household related ones. [Śniegulska 2017: 307]

4 mama:Du—from French: 'tender mother'; see: <https://grupanatemat.pl/mamadu/> [accessed 2 September 2023]; cf. French *douce mère*—'tender mother'.

5 See: <https://grupanatemat.pl/mamadu/> [accessed: 2 September 2023].

It can be noted that the profile of the mother presented in the MD website description is consistent with the profile of the modern mother described in sociological research.

The aim of the analysis is to see whether the above profile and the resulting characteristics of mothers and motherhood are consistent with the image emerging from the titles and leads analysed. I analysed 1395 titles (T) and their accompanying leads (L). On this basis, I created several facets (profiles) to describe the contemporary mother and her social role.

## 2. A suffering and tormented mother

Motherhood has positive connotations and should evoke positive emotions. At the same time, in addition to the moments of happiness and joy that come with the experience of being a mother, there are also moments of sadness and depression caused by various circumstances. Therefore, in Polish culture there are two seemingly contradictory images of the mother: a joyful mother and a suffering mother.<sup>6</sup> In the MD site, by contrast, the latter is represented almost exclusively. Two texts in the period under the study deal with the suffering of women who have lost a child:

[1] T: Doctors Concealed the Truth from Me. “My Child Lived Only a Few Months”

L: Close your eyes and envision what a woman feels when her child is born with so many defects that it cannot breathe on their own. Their body is deformed, eyes are filled with agony, from the very first minute of life. Agata was that woman.

[2] T: After a Miscarriage, It’s Not Just the Heart That Bleeds. The Body Also Needs Care

L: Whether following a miscarriage or the birth of a stillborn child, a woman requires proper care. It’s not just her spirit that needs healing; her body does too. Here, doulas can provide their support, yet it is equally crucial to have open conversations about this topic.

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6 The Mother of God is the archetype of both these images, in particular in cultures attached to the Christian tradition, such as Polish culture. Moreover, the stereotype of the Polish mother is still alive in Polish culture, combining the idealisation and tragedy of a woman sacrificing herself for her children, but also sacrificing her children for a great national cause [Barmiński 2008: 46; Szlachta-Ignatowicz 2022].

There is a greater number of texts that deal with unpleasant discomforts during pregnancy and in connection with childbirth and the postpartum period. This is a time of physical and psychological distress.

[3] T: “It Destroyed Me. I Almost Died.” Pregnancy Complication Turned Her Life into a Nightmare

L: At the time of the recording, she has two children and is pregnant with her third. In a brutally honest confession on TikTok, she says she can no longer function as a mum. She suffers from hyperemesis gravidarum, which is uncontrollable vomiting during pregnancy. Women who have also gone through this are not sparing in their words of support and share their own stories. However, there is no shortage of hate either...

[4] T: Childbirth: Not Just Magic, but Also Blood, Sweat, and Tears. This Birth Photo Moves Thousands of Women

L: In mothers' memories, childbirth is often recalled as a magical moment, yet in reality, it's a time that also has its earthy and physiological aspects. Despite the fact that there are tears of emotion, happiness, and fulfilment, many women experience immense pain, are exhausted, and does not look happy at all. Here is a photo of a mother that captures the overwhelming emotions, but also the physiological and painful aspect of giving birth.

[5] T: She Breastfed Her Husband. “I Was Ready to Offer My Breast to Anyone to Feel Relief”

L: A young mother decided to share her story with her followers. This American woman often talks about breast feeding and believes in normalising it, although some topics shock the online community. There have been discussions about breastfeeding a cousin's child and tasting breast milk. This time, the woman was breastfeeding her husband, but she admits that she had an important reason for doing so.

In the titles and leads to the texts illustrating the **suffering mother** facet, words from the semantic field of life and death appear: *live (only a few weeks)*, *die*, *loss (of pregnancy)*, *miscarriage*. They all carry negative connotations, evoke unpleasant emotions. This is true even of the verb *live*, which at the level of literal meaning refers to the highest existential value. However, when it is supplemented with a participle *only* and a time circumstance, it refers to a verb at the other end of the value scale: *to die*. Words from the semantic field of life and death are associated with sensations of a physical nature: *pain*, *relief (striving to*

*feel it*), *ailment*, *exhaustion*, and of a psychological nature: *nightmare*, *trauma*, and *need for care*. Positive sensations: *happiness*, *elation*, and *fulfilment* are negated or at least diminished by negative sensations. This is particularly evident in example [4], where both the title and the lead are built on the principle of contradiction (cf. the repeated conjunction *but* and the conjunction *despite*). It is noticeable that the parenting website, visited by mothers-to-be and current mothers, does not show a happy mother. Rather, it exposes the reality associated with the “miracle of birth” and speaks of *the darkest side of motherhood*:

[6] T: “Without Help, I Wouldn’t Have Made It to Morning.” The Darkest Side of Motherhood

L: In the “happiest” moments of their lives, they dreamt of death. How many pills to take, is the window high enough? These are thoughts that should not cross the minds of new mothers. Yet these women, despite their dreams of giving birth to a child, suffered when their dream came true. Karolina and Paulina overcame postnatal depression. They are different from each other, their stories vary, but pain is what is common to them.

In the example above, the adjective *happiest* has been written in inverted commas. Hence, we get a picture of a mother suffering, here: suffering from postnatal depression. The feeling of happiness over the birth of a child—stereotypically attributed to all mothers—is transformed into suffering caused by postnatal depression.

After the end of the postpartum period, the mother continues to be a suffering mother or transforms into a tormented mother. In Polish reality, this is the model of motherhood shaped after the Second World War, when women en masse began to combine domestic and professional duties: “The women were overworked and tired, and thus unwilling to consciously maintain social and family ties. They believed that they were fulfilling their social tasks without reflecting on their deeper meaning” [Szlachta-Ignatowicz 2022: 227].

However, in the third decade of the 21st century, this model should be a thing of the past. This is because modern women are striving for a partnership arrangement of roles in the family, which allows them to combine their professional work with their responsibilities as mothers. According to the young generation:

woman’s professional work has [...] a positive impact on the functioning of the family in terms of care and upbringing. [...] working women gain the chance to pursue their own ambitions, self-fulfilment, development, independence and

fuller participation in social life, and thus experience satisfaction and sense of fulfilment. [Śniegulska 2017: 321]

However, the analysis of the material studied does not confirm this statement. Rather, it is in line with Justyna Szlachta-Ignatowicz's observations:

Analysing the attitudes of contemporary Poles, one gets the impression that this pattern [of the tormented Polish Mother—M.T.] has not only entered the consciousness of communist society, but persists in the perception of contemporary Polish society. [Szlachta-Ignatowicz 2022: 227]

This is evidenced by the following examples from the MD website:

[7] T: Polish Women Are Perpetually Sleep-Deprived. All Because They Want to Live a Little

L: Do you ever feel like your day should stretch like elastic? It would be fantastic, because squeezing in house chores, children, extracurricular activities, the dog, laundry, vacuuming, and shopping into those few precious hours is a real challenge. And that's without even mentioning work commitments! No wonder many of us don't have time to sleep.

[8] T: Mothers Are Tired, Fed Up with Pressure. Stop Boxing Us In with More Advice

L: I feel that somewhere along the way, we've lost the contemporary meaning of "freedom", especially in an area close to my heart. Motherhood is a national treasure, and everyone feels entitled to point out your mistakes or make comments, often spitefully. With the best of intentions, of course. Enough is enough, let's have the courage to love our children in our own way.

Attention is drawn here primarily to fatigue and sleep deficit, caused by an overabundance of responsibilities, signalled by the enumeration in lead 7: *embrace managing the house, caring for the children, handling extra-curricular activities, taking care of the dog, handling laundry, vacuuming, shopping, and professional work*. These, in turn, cause anger, expressed by an exclamatory sentence (lead 7) and the imperative mode—*stop* (lead 8). The exclamation mark *enough* also appears, which is a verbal way of communicating anger.

Anger is a negative emotion which, according to the information in the next example, is culturally taboo, especially when it comes to mothers' anger at their own children.



[9] T: Overwhelmed by Anger, I Lock Myself in a Room to Avoid Harming My Child

L: Anger still remains somewhat of a taboo topic. Especially women's anger, and mother's anger is particularly taboo. According to entrenched stereotypes, a mother has little right to express her anger. It's unbecoming for a mother, a woman, to shout, to curse, or to seethe with rage.

The stereotypical mother is an understanding mother who loves her children. The MD website draws attention to the need to break this stereotype and shows the negative emotions of mothers. At the same time, it exposes the tendency, typical of Polish culture, to judge mothers by others (cf. the statement from lead 8: "Motherhood is a national treasure, and everyone feels entitled to point out your mistakes"). For the role of the mother is the subject of much debate. Mothers are under constant scrutiny, so a mother who is tormented can easily become a mother who is neglectful, i.e. one who does not meet societal expectations:

[10] T: "I Took a Child-Free Day, and the Preschool Found Out. There Was an Uproar!"

L: "I can see my children's preschool from my bedroom window. I often work from home, yet the girls are there daily, even when I have a day off, during holidays and over the Christmas cover. I pay for the time and I have that right to it, yet it seems not everyone agrees," Monika begins her letter.

[11] T: Rozenek Faces Backlash Again, Even the Doctor Criticises Her. All Over an "Innocent" Video with Henio

L: One would think that a charming video of a sleeping toddler would endear the viewers. However, this time it didn't. What seemed like an innocent clip of little Henio sparked heated debate not just on Małgorzata Rozenek's profile. Even a medical professional weighed in on the matter involving the child.

[12] T: Branded as Sloppy, They Were Wrong. Here's Why a Clean House Is Over-rated

L: Does a messy home necessarily mean its owner is lazy and untidy? It's easy to slap a label on someone, but the reality is that not tidying up can happen for many reasons—be it a lack of time or poor health. Especially now, as the holiday approaches, chaos and clutter reign in many homes. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that!

The above three examples [10–12] resound with indignation at women who go against common customs. These include taking care of the child in their free time, caring for the child's development in accordance with generally accepted rules (one of which was distorted by Malgorzata Rozenek—allowing a two-year-old child to suck on a dummy, as we learn in the article), and keeping the home tidy. Words with a strong negative connotation appear here: *uproar*, *backlash*, *criticise*, *call someone names*. The MD website aims to dispel these stereotypes. It presents the stories of mothers, including mothers known from the media (celebrities), not to criticise, but to draw attention to the problem. Most often, it stands up for the mothers who are criticised, thus creating a model of the new mother having the right to be imperfect. Hence, the strong statement in lead 8: “Enough is enough, let's have the courage to love our children in our own way”, containing an appeal to all mothers expressed with an inclusive *we*.

Also included in the profile of the tormented mother are texts referring to various child ailments that the mother has to deal with on a daily basis.

[13] T: Title: Help, Teething! There's Only One Symptom, But Many Ways to Ease the Teething Pain

L: Teething can cause a range of symptoms in a child that lead to discomfort. Painful and swollen gums, and excessive drooling can lead to sleep troubles or reduced appetite, which also worries parents. It's no wonder they are looking for ways to soothe their teething child. Unfortunately, not all methods are effective and safe. And what about teething gels? Find out!

[14] T: “My Teenage Daughter Is Pregnant. I'm Angry Because... Now I Have to Raise My Son-in-law”

L: Justyna is 38 years old. She will become a grandmother in December. Her 17-year-old daughter and her boyfriend are expecting the birth of a son. “It happened, they could have waited, but now I won't cry over spilt milk, the kids need help and support. It's not my daughter's pregnancy that keeps me up at night,” admits the woman.

[15] T: Such play should concern you. The shocking campaign opens eyes

L: When they have a tummy ache, a bad dream, or scrape their knee, they usually run straight to mum. This can lull a parent's vigilance. Unfortunately, children who are victims of sexual harassments often remain silent. That's why it's crucial to pay attention to your child's concerning behaviour. Seemingly innocent play can reveal that a child is being harmed.

The above three examples [13–15] represent the group of texts most prevalent in the MD website. They draw attention to a variety of problems faced by mothers, related to the development, health, upbringing of the child, including parenting problems. They are dominated by advice and warnings. Thus, they show the mother constantly present in the life of the child—both young and older. There are words referring to negative emotions, such as horror and fear (*help!*, *shocking*), worry (*something is keeping you up at night*). Leads describe situations of concern. In particular, children's health problems (rash, fever, teething, vaccinations, etc.), various dysfunctions (e.g. autism, Asperger's Syndrome), feeding problems, worrying behaviour not only of the children but also of those in contact with them (peers, teachers) appear here. It can be assumed that a mother's fatigue is caused by constant vigilance—many titles include words of strong directive: *be careful*, *don't do this*, *don't ignore*, *don't make a mistake*, etc. Vigilance, on the other hand, stems from the mother's basic characteristic of being a caregiver.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Independent mother or single mother?

During the period under the study, four texts appeared on the MD site that talked about single and/or independent mothers. Before looking at their titles and leads, I will stop to highlight the terms *single* and *independent*, as they are used interchangeably in the material studied, functioning as synonyms.

In Polish, the adjective *samotny* (*single*) in the context of parenthood means: 'one who has no husband or wife or partner' or 'one who lives alone, without family, friends, without contact with others'; while *samodzielny* (*independent*) is: 'one who acts without recourse to the help or cooperation of other persons or institutions' [WSJP PAN].

Although it is not apparent from the definition itself, singleness [translator's note: the Polish word *samotny* also means 'lone'] connotes negative emotions, often the sadness associated with someone being abandoned by others. The combination of *feeling lone // alone* is always seen as an undesirable state. The opposite is true for *independence*, which connotes positive emotions and is seen as desirable. This is evidenced by the connectives: *to gain*, *to struggle for independence*; *to strive for independence*. The opposite is true for loneliness: *feel the pangs of loneliness*, *loneliness hurts*; *suffer from loneliness*. It is true that one can seek or need loneliness, but then it is a temporary solitude and not a permanent state.

7 It is a trait attributed to mothers worldwide as an essential characteristic [Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2019: 314–316].

When referring to parents (not only mothers), the term *single mother* // *single father* is more commonly used, although in recent years there has been a clear trend to replace these terms with the adjective: *independent*, which draws attention to choice rather than necessity. Both terms, however, are sometimes negated as stigmatising.<sup>8</sup> Sociological literature uses other, neutral terms that do not stigmatise. One writes about *monoparental families*, *single-parent families* or *solo-mothers*, *solo-fathers* [Biedroń, Mitreğa 2014] (as in English: *single-mother*, *single-father*).

In the social sciences addressing the topic of the family, attention is drawn to the fact that research on mothers raising children alone:<sup>9</sup> “[...] has long taken a deficit perspective, mainly looking at what single mothers are missing, and describing them as facing a high risk of social isolation” [Keim 2018: 132].

Such a perspective seems to be sustained by media discourse, not only in Poland: “All too often the term *lone parents* is used by politicians and in the media, without defining which lone parents are meant and thereby classifying all lone parents as problematic” [Salter 2018: 55], despite the fact that it is a heterogeneous group [Biedroń, Mitreğa 2014].

However, in the material studied the problem of solo-mothers is poorly represented. Moreover, as I have already pointed out, there is interchangeable talk of *single* or *independent motherhood*. The image of a mother experiencing negative emotions appears in the titles and leads:

[16] T: To Every Single Mother Who Feels an Added Emptiness During the Holidays. These Words Will Give You Strength

L: Independent mothers may understandably feel apprehensive about the upcoming holidays. Christmas, in our social consciousness, is a family time, celebrated with our loved ones. During this period, some mothers may experience loneliness and guilt for not being able to provide a full family experience for their children. Instead of dwelling on sadness, it's beneficial to shift perspective and create new personal traditions.

8 Cf. the statement by Jerzy Bralczyk in the pages of “Wysokie Obcasy”: “I would be careful with the term *independent mother*. Independence evokes a kind of admiration, but also reduces empathy” [Strójwąg 2019].

9 Single parenthood mainly affects women, both in Poland and other countries [Biedroń, Mitreğa 2014: 66, Bernardi, Larenza 2018: 93]. It is noteworthy that in the volume dedicated to the study of lone parenthood: *Lone Parenthood in the Life Course*, the conjunctions *lone mother(s)* occur more than 800 times, *lone motherhood* 192 times, and the conjunctions *lone father(s)* 42 times and *lone fatherhood* 2 times.

Loneliness is associated with emptiness and sadness, while in the public discourse there is a conviction that the family atmosphere, which—implied by the content of the lead—cannot be created by the mother and the child(ren) alone. Thus, a stereotypical image of a complete family emerges, which in this case would be completed by the presence of the father of the child(ren). This is in line with the conservative understanding of the family, in which “the absence of the father inevitably impairs(s) its functioning” [Biedroń, Mitreęga 2014: 65].

The lexeme *strength* also appears in the title, because mothers raising children alone are precisely required to have the strength or qualities to take on various challenges. The term *independent* rather than *single mothers* is better associated with this:

[17] T: A 73-Year-Old Woman Offers Advice to Single Mothers Based on Her Own Experiences. What Strength!

L: Maturity is a beautiful stage of life that allows one to view everything with perspective. This life perspective and experience are the essence of maturity. Listening to people who are at this point in their lives often brings great satisfaction. This woman addresses single mothers and with her life story proves that a woman is a force to be reckoned with.

[18] T: Single Motherhood Requires Immense Strength. This Campaign Moves to Tears

L: Single mothers are incredibly strong women who know they must have the courage to face the difficult everyday life. In raising their children, no one helps them, and they also try to protect the child from external dangers. In this Finnish social campaign, the single mother is portrayed as a heroine who protects her child from the elements—helping the boy cross a bridge over a turbulent river.

However, attention is drawn to the compulsion to be strong (independent mothers *must have courage in themselves*). This is not a choice. The image of the solo-mother that emerges, especially from the last example, is of a mother faced with a *fait accompli*, performing a heroic act of single-handedly caring for her child.

We also see the image of the mother-heroine in two further examples.

[19] T: 5 Motherhood Lessons I Learned from Mums Raising Kids on Their Own

L: While I call for my husband’s help, my single friends are capable of meeting all the challenges that life throws at them. Although they raise children alone, they really do well and it is worth taking a leaf out of their book.

[20] T: “She Won’t Leave Anyone Without Help”: Single Mum Battles Cancer, Let’s Move Heaven and Earth for Her

L: I know her from the school corridor. Always smiling, kind, the sort of person you greet warmly. Kasia’s daughter goes to the same school as my children. Everyone speaks very highly of her. The words that come up most often are: “She won’t leave anyone without help.” Today, she’s the one who needs our support.

These are mothers from whom others—especially those in relationships—can learn. What is striking about these examples, however, is the positive image of the single (independent) mother fighting above all for the happiness of her child(ren). Single motherhood is elevated to the level of heroism.

Related to the image of the single (independent) mother is the topic of child support.

[21] T: Child Support from the Government Finally Available for Those with Higher Earnings. A Major Change in Regulations

L: Any parent who has court-ordered child support for a child or children and meets the income criterion can receive child support from the child support fund if the child’s parent obliged to pay is insolvent [...].

[22] T: Battling for Child Support: Must You Prove Your Child’s Expenses?

L: Are you fighting for child support? It’s generally believed you should show the court precisely what it costs to support your child. Based on this, the court is expected to grant you a sum that matches your claim. But what if you’re unable to compile all the necessary documentation and evidence? Does this mean you won’t receive any maintenance?

[23] T: Solicitor Shatters a Major Myth About Setting Maintenance: The Role of Receipts

L: If you’re planning to submit an application for child maintenance, conventional wisdom suggests you need to prove exactly how much your child’s upkeep costs you, so the court can allocate a fair amount. It’s commonly thought that keeping all your receipts is a sound method. But do they actually make a difference to the court’s decision?

The issue of child support is addressed only in the website for mothers, although fathers are also entitled to it, as evidenced by the use of the lexeme *parent*, which indicates neither the father nor the mother, or the use of forms which

do not indicate grammatical gender. Stereotypically (and statistically), however, in Poland, child support is collected by the mother,<sup>10</sup> as indicated by the feminine form in title [22]. Furthermore, here again we see the mother who is forced to fight—she *submits an application for*, *strives* or even *fight*s for child support. In order to do so, it is necessary to reach out in various *ways*, which shows that this is another area of the mother's activities, consuming time and energy. This is also informed by the adverb *finally*, which communicates that what has gone on before is judged negatively. There are also words with a should modality in the above texts: *you must*, *you should*, as in the texts referring to the profile of the mother-caretaker.

#### 4. A (non)working mother

In the material studied, few texts deal with the situation of women in the labour market. If they do appear, however, attention is drawn to the unequal treatment of women, and to the difficulty of reconciling work and childcare. This is especially true for mothers of young children.

[24] T: One in Three Mothers of Young Children Out of Workforce: The Why Revealed

L: Motherhood profoundly alters everything. The latest report from the Polish Economic Institute demonstrates the immense influence that the birth of a child has on women's career trajectories. A significant number withdraw from the labour market entirely. When they attempt to re-enter the workforce years later, they are met with a multitude of obstacles.

[25] T: Motherhood in the Workplace: Punished and Unaware

L: Juggling motherhood and a full-time job not only lead to physical and psychological exhaustion for many women. Numerous young mothers fail to recognise that they face workplace discrimination simply because they have children, mistaking such treatment as normal. This eye-opening report aims to alert working mothers to this discrimination.

[26] T: "Tired of Working as if I Had No Kids": A Sentiment Every Employed Mother Understands

L: Being a mother, a wife and a full-time employee is a daily reality for many of us. The reality for many includes being a mother, a wife, and a full-time

10 "The fact that children usually stay with their mothers after their parents have separated means that child support is a man's business in Poland. Out of almost 264,000 'child support givers' who owe a total of PLN 11.4 billion, mothers account for only 6 per cent and have less than 4 per cent of the total arrears" [according to: *Dzień matki...* 2022].

employee, striving to be outstanding in every role. This often leads to guilt and remorse when failing to meet these self-imposed standards. This heartfelt letter from a working mother serves as a reminder: it's never too late to re-evaluate and reprioritise.

- [27] T: Four Weeks of Child Illness: The Working Mother's Dilemma  
 L: One doesn't truly understand life's complexities until they've had to work from home with a sick child. To be serious, it's an unparalleled education in the art of distraction, the division of attention, and the sheer exhaustion that comes with it.

The above examples mainly highlight the difficulties women face. These are the illness of the child, the need to take care of the child while working (this applies to work done at home), the lack of opportunity to step out of the role of mother and, on the other hand, the pressure to stop being a mother while working. Falling from extreme to extreme is evident here. The problem that affects mothers is highlighted: the prototypical good mother devotes all her time to her child(ren) and family. Thus, she gives up her life outside the family, as evidenced by negatively charged verbs: *to withdraw from the labour market*, or nouns *a gap from the career market*. Returning to work is almost considered heroic:

- [28] T: Mother Returns to Work After an Extended Break: Feasible Even After 5 Years!  
 L: Magdalena Lilla-Toczek, a store manager at JYSK Poland and a mother of three, proves that a professional comeback is achievable, regardless of a prolonged hiatus. Following the birth of her second child, she took maternity and parental leave, during which she decided to have a third child, resulting in as long as a 5-year gap from her career. Her story is a testament to the possibility of re-engaging with one's profession after significant time away.
- [29] T: Fearless Together Project Launches—An Initiative to Boost Women's Careers in Finance  
 L: On International Women's Day, 8 March, the Fearless Together #empower your career in finance project was inaugurated. The choice of date is deliberate, aiming to uplift women from Poland and Ukraine seeking to advance their careers in the financial sector. Participants will benefit from the guidance of proven experts, including mentoring, training, and psychological support. The campaign is organised by State Street Global



Advisors Poland in collaboration with the Mamo Pracuj Foundation, with CFA Society Poland as a partner.

Attention is drawn to the name of the project in example [29], which refers to a feeling of fear, probably accompanying women who want to take up work.<sup>11</sup> Thus, we get the image of a mother who needs encouragement to dare to step out of her only role—that of mother. We also see such encouragement in example [28]: it is about return and opportunity. Both the title and the lead are strongly emotionally charged: there are particles *until, even, as long as, prolonged* and exclamatory sentences. Thus, the story described in the article heralded by the title and lead [28] could fit into the Fearless Together campaign strategy. Texts addressing the issue of mothers' work also reinforce the profile of the tired mother (cf. examples [26–27], in which lexemes referring to feelings of tiredness as well as suffering appear: *exhaustion, guilt, and punished*).

When talking about a mother as a woman in the labour market, the communicative pragmatic situation draws attention. It is either an encouragement or a complaint. What is lacking, however, are texts with an informative function, as appear, for example, in DH, a website aimed at fathers:

- [30] T: Lucrative Earnings in This Industry: Salaries Start at 10,000 PLN  
 L: The latest report “Cybersecurity. Labour Market in Poland 2023” reveals a significant demand for workers with several years of experience in the IT industry—and their earnings are equally substantial.

Although it is not a woman's role (stereotypically) to provide for the family, the lack of money and the increasing expenses also become her problem. Financial issues are primarily a source of negative emotions. It is written about how much one has to spend on a child or to maintain a family, and it is always too much:

- [31] T: The Cost of Nappies: The First Three Months May Shock You!  
 L: Just how much it costs to raise a child today? It's challenging to estimate the expenses from birth until achieving financial independence as it largely

11 The article reads: “The programme was inspired by the famous Fearless Girl sculpture by Kristen Visbal. The Fearless Girl sculpture was created in 2017 by State Street Global Advisors as part of a campaign to promote gender diversity in business. The response it has received, almost becoming a pop culture icon, has exceeded our expectations and is testament to the importance of women's equality, not just in business”, says Ann Prendergast, CEO at SSGA Europe Limited” [*Startuje projekt...* 2023].

depends on individual needs. However, we can attempt to calculate the costs parents will face in the initial period on... nappies alone—and the amount is quite impressive.

[32] T: “Ashamed Before the Kids: We Can’t Afford the Cinema Anymore.” How Inflation Is Stripping Away Our Quality of Life

L: We’re bombarded with holiday advertisements from every direction, stores stack toys next to potatoes, and we find ourselves increasingly having to say “no” to our children. It’s one thing if it’s the 46th set of bricks, but it’s much worse when financial constraints force us to make significant changes to the standard of living that our child has become accustomed to.

[33] T: Will Easter Empty Our Wallets? Comparing Prices for Ingredients Like Those in Vegetable Salad

L: In March, the food price increase hit 24 percent. This means we’re facing the highest inflation in years at 16.2 percent, making Easter 2023 one of the most expensive we have seen in a long time. We’ve checked the cost of basic food items essential for preparing Easter dishes.

In the examples above, words with strong negative overtones dominate: *shock*, *strip away* (*quality of life*), or *empty our wallets*. Motherhood is therefore a source of negative emotions: shame (in front of the children), worry and disbelief. At the same time, the MD site shows a woman who is financially dependent on her partner (husband), who does not appreciate the work a woman does for the home, the family, and the children. In the following title [34], a strongly pejorative term *freeloader* appears, describing someone who does not work and lives at someone else’s expense:

[34] T: “Husband Sees Child’s Expenses as Frivolity, Me as a Freeloader. Joint Account is a Mistake”

L: Increasingly, women are speaking out about how having a joint bank account with their husband might not be the wisest decision. “When I started a family, I was convinced that my husband and I should share everything: a home, children, a car, and finances. I was led to believe that a prenup or separate accounts meant leaving a backdoor open in case of divorce. That it went against the ‘till death do us part’ vow, and that a husband and wife should be united in every aspect of life. Now, I regret it,” writes Ola.

In the material analysed, some of the texts deal with various assistance programmes: 500+, 300+, care allowances, child support. Thus, we get a picture of a mother—a beneficiary of these programmes.

- [35] T: Calculation of the Current Value of ‘500 plus’ Programme Stuns Parents  
 L: Discussions about the indexation of the ‘500 plus’ benefit have been ongoing since last year when inflation in Poland caused the value of this parent-targeted subsidy for every child to plummet. Experts have checked what the ‘500 plus’ should currently amount to in order to retain its value from 2016, when the Family 500 plus program was introduced. The figure may surprise some—it’s merely a 200 PLN increase.
- [36] T: Caregiver Benefit to Increase, But Not as Much as Hoped  
 L: Parents caring for a disabled child often have to significantly limit their professional activity, and in many cases, resign from it altogether. Due to such circumstances, they can count on some financial support from the state in the form of a caregiver benefit. However, the controversy surrounds its proposed increase for next year.
- [37] T: Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) Changes Rules: A Simple Mistake Can Cost Your Childcare Allowance  
 L: If you have sickness insurance, you are entitled to a childcare allowance under certain conditions. However, it’s important to be aware that the rules for applying for this allowance have changed. It’s worth knowing them, as an incorrectly filed application will not be accepted by the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), and you may lose out on the benefit.

Although the above examples do not directly point to women-mothers as the only recipients of the information provided (since both parents are mentioned), it should be noted that this content only appears in the website for mothers. It therefore appears that the issue of benefits (as well as the collection of child support) does not apply to fathers<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. Mother as a woman

Sociologists point to the changing model of both motherhood and womanhood. As written by Anna Śniegulska: “Indeed, emancipation processes have

<sup>12</sup> As the quantitative analysis of the content of both websites has shown: Trysińska in print a.

liberated women from the restraining corset of socio-economic and educational conditions, altering their position in the space of marital and family life” [Śniegulska 2017: 307].

The fact that the role of mother does not deprive a woman of the need to feel her own femininity is emphasised. In addition to fulfilling the role of mother, a woman should perform other roles, fulfil her plans outside the home and family [Kotlarska-Michalska 2012: 108–109]. According to the report *The Social Role of Mother—Challenges of Modern Motherhood*, a contemporary mother does not lose herself in motherhood; she does not forget that she is a woman. Consequently, she takes care of her beauty, intellectual development and leisure time [see: Krause 2014: 29]. However, the analysis of the research material does not confirm this trend. The parenting website shows the woman in a dyad: mother—child. Here, the woman basically does not function outside the role of mother and housewife. If the issue of beauty or appearance is addressed, attention is drawn to problematic aspects of femininity (overly large breasts, menstruation, weight problems):

[38] T: Are Large Breasts an Asset? For Many Women, It’s a Curse. Everyone Should Read This Post

L: Who doesn’t like beautiful and large breasts? Men are fond of them, and even women with smaller sizes often dream of augmenting what they have in their bras. However, not everyone realises that such sexy, enticing, and extremely feminine shapes can often be the source of unpleasant situations and complexes.

[39] T: In the 21st Century, Hospitals Still Unaware Women Menstruate. Bleeding? Deal With It Yourself

L: It’s incredible that in the 21st century, in a civilised country, we still need to discuss such fundamental issues. The fact that women menstruate is taught to children in elementary school. It’s not some secret knowledge! And yet, there are places, like HOSPITALS, where this fact still seems to cause astonishment.

[40] T: Believed to Aid Weight Loss and Act as an Aphrodisiac. We Check How Much Truth Is In This

L: The biggest stars have made it famous. Sea moss helped them lose weight and even improved their sex lives. More and more people are being tempted by the miraculous properties of this specific. But what does science have to say about it?

The emotional emphasis of the first two titles and leads in particular draws attention. They refer to the strong discomfort caused by *the curse of large breasts* or menstrual bleeding during a hospitalisation and the lack of personal hygiene measures. The last example, on the other hand, draws attention to the widespread—especially among women, including those who have gained weight during pregnancy—fashion for weight loss and the search for effective ways to do so. However, the words *believe* and *tempt*, cast doubt on the effectiveness of the sea moss *specific* described in the article. What is missing are texts that show a woman who is attractive, happy with her appearance and with the fact that she is a woman. There are also no texts related to women's fashion trends. The hashtag #moda (#fashion) refers to children's fashion and there are generally texts sponsored by companies or fashion shops, e.g.

[41] T: Time to Swap Out the “Transitional” Pieces in the Closet.

L: A jacket is an essential piece of clothing in winter. But what about spring? With the right modifications, this type of outerwear is definitely an interesting option for this time of year. Especially since spring has its “moods”, requiring a compromise between lightness and airiness on one hand and durability and weather resistance on the other hand. The brand Reserved has already found it.

[42] T: Functional Clothes with Empathetic Design. For an Infant, They Will Be Like a Personal Physiotherapist

L: Did you know that everyday clothes can support the proper development of children in their first months of life? Yes, those rompers or bodysuits covering infants can have a physiotherapeutic effect on them. Of course, this is only the case if they are designed appropriately, which is not so common. The creators of Kształcialki show how it's done.

The implication is that a woman—as a mother—is solely preoccupied with children's fashion, consistently focused on her own child. The portrayal within the MD website of a mother who feels no need to tend to her femininity aligns with the image emerging from survey research conducted at the end of the 20th century by Ewa Olechnowicz [see: Bartmiński 2008: 43]. When participants were asked about objects emblematic of motherhood, they predominantly attributed to her items associated with cooking and nutrition, household chores, thus revealing the fundamental role of a mother as a woman: that of a nurturer, caregiver, and educator of children. Noticeably absent was the image of the mother as a woman who cares for her appearance and elegance. The material derived

from the MD website demonstrates that, after 30 years, this image has fundamentally remained unchanged.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

Although the MD website represents the profile of a liberal press and therefore tries to break the harmful stereotypes that stigmatise women-mothers, it largely presents the image of a woman in a mother-child dyad. On the one hand, this is natural, as the website in question is a parenting website, i.e. one that focuses on content related to motherhood, but on the other hand, it presents a rather one-dimensional image of a mother as a woman. One could say that this image is consistent with the image resulting from the definition of the word *mother* expressed in the convention of Anna Wierzbicka's "natural semantic metalanguage":

X is a mother to Y =

(a) once Y was inside X

(b) at that time Y was, in a sense, part of X

(c) consequently, people may conceive of X in this manner:

'X wants to do good things for Y

X doesn't want bad things to happen to Y [Wierzbicka 1999: 34]

The media image of the mother presented by the MD website emphasises especially the last two parts of the explication: the mother wants to do good things for her child and does not want bad things to happen to her child. This profile of mother is not surprising. It can be assumed that the MD website is mainly visited by mothers who are aware of their motherhood and are looking for information mainly related to the social role of a mother. However, it is worth looking at the image of the mother presented in the texts in the context of the assumptions declared by the website. Let us therefore recall: *mama:Du* is a woman who cares about her child and herself, is wise, aware, curious about the world, catches trends, is adept at new technologies and social media—on Facebook and Instagram, she is educated, fashionable, ambitious and brave; she is a woman who is not afraid to ask difficult questions about love, relationships or sex.

An analysis of the titles and leads shows a mother who is first and foremost caring for her child—aware above all of the problems that raising her child can present. She is also aware of all the inconveniences that may befall her from the moment of the child's conception (pregnancy ailments) to problems with teenage children. However, she acquires this awareness in the process of familiarising herself with content that is cautionary. Indeed, much of the text has negative

overtone and serves to draw attention to what can happen. Consequently, the mother-caretaker has to be vigilant at all times, which corresponds to the profile of the suffering and tormented mother.

Mama:Du is a courageous mother, as she has the courage to defy the stereotypical expectations of the role she holds. She is then accompanied by feelings of anger and indignation. She appeals to other mothers to have the courage to defy public opinion, because for the MD mother is subject to constant judgement.

Alongside the courageous mother, exemplified by the independent (not lone) mother, however, is the mother who feels sadness and anxiety. This is a woman who has guilt and feels undervalued—by her partner (husband), her employer and also by her older children. It is difficult to find a mother as a woman taking care of herself, of her own needs. If she does, she immediately becomes an object of criticism. Neither do we see a mother who is interested in new technologies or who has a hobby.

Summarising reflections on the media image of motherhood on the MD parenting website, it can be observed that it is a realistic portrayal, in line with Polish circumstances.<sup>13</sup> At the same time—and this is worth emphasising—the stereotypical image of a mother tormented by domestic duties, living exclusively in a mother-child dyad is often shown with the aim of changing it. However, the role of the mother is a role so entrenched in a given culture that changing its perception is difficult and slow. Undoubtedly, the media, including parenting media, have an important role to play in this regard.

*Translated by Ewa Kisiel*

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<sup>13</sup> Although some of the texts describe the experiences of mothers from other countries, mainly America.

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