

and the home, and the often childless career woman. Regardless of her choice of life path—home, career, or a combination of both—women will always find those who seem better at raising children, running their home, or advancing their career. A negative self-comparison may lead an individual to doubt their choices (for example, “I could devote more energy to achieve what my friends have since we graduated from university”) or achievements (“I thought I was doing a good job raising my children until I saw how much attention my friend pays them!”). The sheer variety of biographies of women is just one source of potentially negative comparison, another is social media. As one mother commented on an online forum:

My question then is, how do you make mommy friends if the topics we tend to and like to talk about are always on our babies’ development, milestones, what are we doing for our babies etc.? That’s my biggest struggle: To be mindful not to ask questions that would trigger comparison, but then to realize I have nothing else to say anymore if I cut that out (a BabyCenter Member, online comment, 2017).

In the past, people typically compared themselves with those with whom they had direct contact, such as their siblings, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. This has been significantly expanded by the rise of social media, increasing the number of reference groups. With easy access to information, people often visit the profiles of their friends or acquaintances and compare themselves. This is often done with people who have never met one another—an individual viewing online Facebook profiles when looking for a particular contact for instance. Moreover, celebrities, youtubers, and bloggers. As a result, social media users often compare themselves with those they have never, and likely never will, meet or even see beyond the computer screen.

Communicating with others via the Internet deprives us of many of the elements of face-to-face interaction. As a consequence, we are not always able to verify the information to which we are exposed—including that pertaining to the lives of other people. In the past, finding out what was happening in the lives of other people—be they friends, family, or acquaintances—typically required direct contact, observation, or rumor. Today, this information is easily available online. The potential number of exotic trips, parties, dates, games, meetings, concerts, city breaks, magical sunsets, or visits to a stylish restaurant—events in which we are unable to participate and witnessed online—have never been so big.

### Looking up: Comparison and self-esteem

Kate Middleton gave birth to her third child on April 23, 2018 at 11:01 a.m. At 6 p.m. that same day, she left St. Mary’s Hospital dressed in a red dress and high

heels—a perfectly style image that delighted the fans and reporters gathered at the entrance. The reaction of many mothers on Twitter and Instagram was immediate: comparison photos showing the 36-year-old Duchess of Cambridge radiant and in heels just 7 hours after giving birth, and them—tired, pale, and lying in their hospital beds. As one user commented on the *Daily Mail*, “...I mean, I know she had help to look that good, but I would’ve needed a mortician that specializes in putting make up on corpses and industrial quantities of sanitary wear” (quoted in *Daily Mail*, 2018).

Of course, comparing oneself to those in a more desirable position or situation can be beneficial when used as inspiration for self-improvement. In this case, others are considered as role models. However, the effect of this type of comparison is usually not inspirational, often evoking a sense of inferiority instead. This can lead to lower self-esteem and cause negative feelings like gloom, sadness, and even depression (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014). In contrast, comparing oneself to those we consider to be in an inferior or worse position or state usually leads to an improvement in our self-esteem. As such, it seems possible for someone to permanently feel good if they can cleverly select those to whom they compare themselves. It is enough to be aware of those who are better than us and to compare ourselves with those faring worse: I am overweight, but my neighbor is obese; I got a bad grade, but others did worse; I broke my leg, but the patient in the bed next to me has broken two. I should not be depressed because I am not poor. This is a clever but unreliable strategy. Indeed, the results of numerous studies have shown that the majority of people compare themselves to those they feel are above them.

Humans are not the only species in which comparison plays a prominent role. Besides, not only us, but also other species. Neurobiologists from Duke University conducted an interesting experiment with macaque monkeys. Various photographs were presented to the monkeys, and their eye movement tracked. Three types of photographs were shown: one of a macaque monkey with a high status in its troop, another showed a low status macaque, while the third showed the buttocks of a female macaque. Every time the monkey looked at a particular picture, they were rewarded with some juice—an attractive reward for the thirsty animal. Looking at the picture with the low status macaque was awarded the highest amount of juice, while that with a high status macaque was awarded a smaller amount. Thus, a macaque received less juice each time they selected a picture with an important figure. Based on the varying amount of juice awarded, the researchers were able to determine the importance the macaque subjects attributed to each image. The results showed astonishing consensus: the macaques required significant reward to select images of a macaque of lower status (Deaner, Khera, & Platt, 2005).

Although we have a tendency to compare ourselves to those we deem superior, we constantly come into contact with people—better, worse, and just like us. As one mother commented online,

I never felt like I had it together compared to all the other moms I knew. Then I had my epiphany moment when I showed up unexpectedly to a friend's house. It was messy; not grossly so, but just...lived in. It was such a relief! And I realized that we all show people what we want them to see and it ends up making us all feel less than, like we better keep hiding who we really are in case we're the only screw ups. So I decided to stop hiding and show people the real me, so that if it even only helped one other mom stop feeling "less than" I'd have done what I set out to do (Lauren Baker Cormier, online comment, 2015).

However, to experience this type of revelation, you need an "offline" reality, direct contact with another person, her life, and, in this case, her home. However, social media is pervasive. Scrolling through Instagram or Facebook, we see images of appetizing meals, interesting destinations, or new clothes—a seemingly idealistic life dripping with intense sensations, often prompting us to ask: is my life as exciting as that of my friend? Am I happy with my life as it is?

### "I'm not a good enough mother": Ideal motherhood and social media

We describe ourselves and the world around us in relative terms. For instance, someone who is 185 cm in height is generally considered tall, but would be deemed short when compared to basketball players. As in the case of comparing objects in terms of their physical features, we use comparisons with other people to assess behaviors, achievements, and psychological characteristics. This is often the only way to determine where we fit in society and how we are doing. Without a magical mirror able to identify the most beautiful person in the world, it is difficult to assess our attractiveness objectively. There are no absolute standards. Indeed, areas that are important to us—such as intelligence, attractiveness, or our parental abilities—are usually assessed through comparison with others. Where there are no clearly defined standards, others constitute indispensable reference points. This is significant in respect to motherhood, and the way in which mothers compare themselves: there is no agreed upon list of criteria to assess a "good mother," it has never been created, and never without recourse to subjective values. In other words, there is no clear definition of a "good mother": Is a mother good if she helps her child with their homework three times a week, and bad if she does not? Is a mother good if her child eats two pieces of fruit each day, and bad if she allows them to eat a hamburger? There are no simple answers to such questions. Hence, the tendency to compare has been strengthened by the role that many women attribute to motherhood and the pressures they feel from their surroundings.

This partly explains the interest in family-orientated parents and couples on social media. For instance, in 2017, the photo of a pregnant Beyoncé was the

most liked photo on social media with over 11 million “likes,” with football star Cristiano Ronaldo and his twins coming in a close second. Indeed, social media and the Internet now constitute the main source of information about raising children. This is particularly applicable to women between the ages of 20 and 35, and especially mothers of young children who care for them at home. Full of uncertainty with regard to the “correct” way of raising their child, they seek to affirm their values by identifying them in others. A booming online platform of engagement has developed as a result, with articles, blogs, and Internet forums providing platforms to discuss how best to raise a child. These resources include those dedicated to subjects like how to raise children who are adopted child, have been diagnosed with autism, have above-average intelligence, or medical issues like diabetes. There are blogs providing tips on various parenting approaches, such as simple, close to nature, holistic, attentive, and ecological one. Still others are aimed at fathers, single mothers, working mothers, godmothers, stay-at-home mothers, older mothers, homosexual parents, as well as those of different religions. Other blogs are dedicated to notions of thrift, or how to raise a child despite financial difficulties.

Demand has created supply. Although it could be the other way around: companies have convinced us that new superheroes are needed. Instamothers entered the online scene: active, neat, smiling, rested, perfect—at least when the camera’s aperture is released—they form a false image of motherhood, an ideal that evokes envy and aspiration in others. The standard is unobtainable for the majority of women, who buy similar clothes or follow the same trends in the hope of reaching the ideal set by these Instamothers. Of course, there are other women that set these standards—such as celebrity mothers, who are successful, sleek, happy, and engaged in the upbringing of their children. Often, these women appear to have no conflict between work and family commitments, as if such a notion is entirely foreign to them.

The Internet ideal, loved by commercials, is the “alpha mother”: educated, financially comfortable, and dedicated to fulfilling her role as a mother. Alpha mothers are part of the ideology of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996), which emphasizes that being a good mother requires the acquisition of skills and knowledge—including those of a therapist, pediatrician, teacher, and dietician. The alpha mother must work for everything. In their view, good motherhood cannot result from maternal instinct alone. Proper childcare is like doing a good job—it requires training. Consequently, they diligently browse the Internet in search of the latest trends, information, and role models. In US media, so-called “Alpha Mom TV” is aimed at “the new breed of ‘go to’ moms who are constantly looking to be ahead of the curve and ‘in the know’ on the newest innovations, hippest trends and research breakthroughs” (Patterson, 2018).

Comparison with such women seldom has a positive effect. As one blogger admitted:

I was looking at rich mothers, female celebrities and I thought that I would run happily with a pram in the park, but I push my body trying not to overturn over my sleepy eyelids. I was going to drown in the smells of wonderful oils and shampoos, and they only serve to kill the stench from the diaper. I was supposed to dress him like a little gentleman in designer fictional clothes, and I change the clothes of my little pig like “still acceptable” (Jaskółka, online comment, 2013).

Another wrote:

I can definitely let those amazing women’s achievements make me feel inferior. I had my babies in hospitals with epidurals, even though I originally planned natural births. I don’t buy all organic produce. I let my daughter watch TV more than I would like (and I feel constantly good and guilty about it, but I still do it)...I secretly love store bought junk food...At the end of a difficult day I’d much rather plop myself in front of Netflix than do something more productive (Laundry Lady, user comment, 2012).

The perfectly looking mothers seem to be *nihil novi*. Pictures of housewives from the 1950s show that mothers are happiest performing domestic duties: they dance as they clean, think of their husband’s happiness upon returning home as they cook, and raise polite children with neatly combed and parted hair. The myth of the ideal nuclear family became widespread, and these same elements persist today. Every day, social media—Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram—inundates us with an avalanche of filtered photos of seemingly ideal lives.

### “I know it’s not true...but that does not help”

When Harimao Lee, an influencer from Hong Kong, posted a photo taken in business class on a flight to Rome on Instagram, the Internet boiled with comments. Posing with a glass of champagne, Lee selected a perfect composition and lighting for a fairy-tale charm. Followers were quick to criticize the contrived nature of the photo: “This is absurd! This kind of staged nonsense is a joke. Nobody travels this way,” noted one follower. Of course, the majority of people are aware that what is shown on social media seldom reflects reality. However, this knowledge does not protect us. We continue to compare ourselves despite knowing that the image presented in social media is, at best, a highly stylized and contrived snapshot of someone else’s life—a moment that talks about the life of its author as much as a book cover does the book’s content. As one user noted of her apparent

in which the man does relatively more housework, the woman receives the social praise. As a result, men tend to find housework not worth the time or effort. Although there is no evidence, it seems likely that a man coined the phrase “A clean house is a sign of wasted life.”

Men’s relative lack of motivation to do housework can also be due to the belief that they lack the appropriate skills. In this case, “I cannot do it” equates to “I do not want to learn.” A potential explanation for the lack of men’s involvement is their not knowing what needs to be done. In the case of contemporary men, their fathers seldom did housework while the efforts of their mothers often went unnoticed. In this case, while a man may notice a pile of dirty dishes, he may not perceive that there is a household task—washing the dishes—to be done. For men, there is no sign saying, “wash these dishes.” As a result, the reality of the masculine world remains different to that of the female one.

### “The one who knows”: The inequality of mental workload

In the Mexican village of Tepoztlan, men who want to control their family keep their earned money and give small allowances to their wives. Such men were called *cuilchilete* or “a man with a long penis.” *Cuilchilete* were considered misers and not suitable as husbands. Although the wife has traditionally been subordinate to her husband, she is responsible for planning, organizing, and running a household, as well as educating and looking after children (Lewis, 1949, p. 604). It is women who remember their children’s shoe size, know what is missing in the refrigerator, remember the birthdays of distant relatives, and where the pin numbers for the various accounts are hidden. Women are often assumed to be better at such tasks. As mothers or partners, the woman is “the one who knows,” her knowledge encompassing all things related to raising a child and running a household. As a result, her every thought tends to be centered on what needs to be done, both now and in the future. Such work is continuous, tiring, and, more often than not, invisible.

The problem of the “invisibility” of the work done in the home is easily illustrated. If I asked you, as an external observer, to estimate the workload at home, what would you think? Cleaning, cooking, ironing, shopping, paying bills, babysitting, and many other activities can be observed if cameras are installed everywhere. However, what about the activities that we do not see? These include monitoring the cleanliness and provisions of the household, planning chores and activities, gathering information and responding accordingly, and delegating tasks. In enterprises, people performing these tasks are known as managers. While managers in a work environment are typically the highest paid member of the staff, the work of the (female) manager of the home is seldom noticed by her loved ones.

In popular culture, female characters are often shown feeding their children while preparing dinner and greeting guests. In on such comic, this image was followed by a man exclaiming, “You should’ve asked! I would’ve helped!” The author of this particular comic strip, Emma, adds: “When a man expects his partner to ask him to do things, he is viewing her as a manager of household chores. So it’s up to her to know what needs to be done and when” (Emma, online comment, 2017). The term “mental workload” refers to “the ability to process available information and resources required for the system to meet expectations.” The workload of “those who know”—that is, woman—predominantly comprises controlling activities aimed at directing attention in the right direction, dealing with opposing goals, selecting strategies, adapting to the complexity of the task, and determining tolerance levels of productivity levels (Jex, 1988). Some may be surprised by the fact that Jex’s (1988) notion of how women operate in the home was originally based on machine operators who experienced a high level of mental strain in their work. Of course, psychological stress is being investigated in a number of fields, particularly on those who require constant focus and attention, including astronauts, pilots, drivers, submarine officers, and machine operators. However, it is relatively rare for the term to appear in publications devoted to housework and childcare.

Suzan Walzer (1998) has drawn attention to the three categories of mental labor in parents: namely, worrying, processing information, and managing the division of labor. According to Walzer (1998), although men have an active role in childcare, such mental labor is predominantly performed by mothers. These categories are worth further examination.

## Worrying

Jaworska (2017), a blogger, observed:

...we live today in times of ubiquitous fear for children...Since they are very young we try to make them aware of the dangers that life brings. We make sure that they do not talk to strangers, do not take anything from them, we carry them everywhere, we give them telephones so that we can control them, we do not take our eyes off when they are in water.”

Indeed, Sylvia, one of the participants in Walzer’s (1998) study, stated, “My mind is always on something, you know, how is he? Or how’s he eating? Or how he’s this or that, how he’s doing in day care.” (Walzer, 1998, p. 33). By definition, worrying is something unpleasant, and often related to sadness and anxiety. Indeed, the etymological root of the word “worry” is *wyrgan*, which means “strangle.”

Certainly, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that intense worry can make us feel as though we are choking. We often worry about what might happen, knowing that there is always the possibility of something bad on the horizon. In our mind, the question of “what if...?” is haunts us, strengthening our fear that something bad might happen. The worry of mothers is something of a truism. As one participant noted in a study conducted by Walzer (1998), “Mothers worry a lot.”

There is a saying: mothers do not sleep, they just worry with their eyes closed. Indeed, worrying is expected of a mother, especially when her child is very young. It is widely believed that a woman who is not worried about her children cannot be a good mother (Walzer, 1998). Consequently, women can show concern due to their fears about meeting social expectations, thus following the expected behavior of a good mother. Maternal worry is partly rooted in a mother’s environment. As Williams, writing for the *Guardian* (2018), recalled, “When I got pregnant myself, I realised that this drive towards obedience, the need to prove that you will create, instinctively, the healthiest possible womb-environment for your foetus, doesn’t come from you: it comes from outside.” Worrying about a child can take various forms: from concentrating on details like whether the child has eaten enough, to more general concerns surrounding the good motherhood. Nonetheless, even general worries translate into specific behaviors. Fears about being a good mother can translate into action, like looking for information about child-related diseases or initiating meetings with their teachers.

Of course, caring for the well-being of others is noble, and many people—especially mothers—do what is they believe is best. However, it is important to note that women expect that the way their children feel, dress, and behave affect the way people assess them. This is much more meaningful for mothers than fathers. Moreover, the grading scale seems to start from a negative “bad mother” to a neutral “this is how it should be.” As a mother admitted in Walzer’s (1998) study, “I think that people don’t look at you and say, ‘oh there’s a good mother,’ but they will look at people and say, ‘oh there’s a bad mother’” (p. 36). A recent study revealed that six out of ten mothers had been criticized for the way in which they care for their child—the criticism generally focused on matters of discipline and nutrition. Of course, it is often the people closest to us that are the most critical: parents, partners, friends, and other mothers (Mott Poll Report, 2017). The combination of sudden changes in the needs and requirements of growing children, the accumulation of new information about what is best for the child, and diverse cultural norms regarding parenthood produce a social battlefield with mothers in the middle.



## Processing information

Generally, women spend much time seeking more information about parenting, resulting in the assumption that mother's "simply knows better." The mother is the manager of the "child and household" project. Examining contemporary parenting guides, Hays (1996) observed that although they did not directly categorize tasks into maternal and paternal duties, such texts served to consolidate and deepen these divisions because they predominantly targeted mothers. This trend is reflected elsewhere. For instance, many parents look for information on the Internet. However, there are significant differences in the sex and age of Internet users. A typical parent using the Internet is a white, middle class woman under the age of 35 (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). It is estimated that the vast majority (85%–95%) of parents who use the Internet in connection with parenting are women. Moreover, such Internet users primarily seek health-related information (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005).

## Managing the division of labor

Management involves a set of activities—including planning, decision-making, organizing, leading, and controlling—directed toward an organization's human, financial, physical, and informational resources with the intent to achieve organizational goals in an efficient and effective manner (Griffin, 2005, p. 6). In organizational contexts, managers are often the highest paid employee. Moreover, managerial positions are predominantly occupied by men. The definition of manager also fits the (unpaid) role undertaken by women in the household. Women monitor, set deadlines, plan, organize, and synchronize both their own housework and the activities of family members. Indeed, management plays a key role in the efficient functioning of modern families. Families must anticipate and plan who receives, who performs specific tasks, who buys and when, and so on. Conversations at the table often involve looking for solutions and setting schedules. As the anthropologist Darrah (2007) notes, the hidden element of being busy is the need to devote time to management. Confirming and transmitting an instruction like "are you at home? Dinner is on the top shelf of the fridge" takes time and effort. Moreover, because modern families have many different tasks, the proper coordination of all activities requires management, which contributes to increasing the scope of such tasks.

## The mental labor of motherhood

To date, few studies have been conducted on mental labor in the household. In a study conducted by Alby, Fatigante, and Zuccheromaglio (2014), women described the specific type of commitment required in managing the needs and activities of all family members. Thinking ahead and remembering everything is a kind of mental effort that was deemed particularly tiring. As one woman noted, “Concerning the energy I spend for the organization, it is mentally very burdening” (Alby et al., 2014, p. 34). The difficulty of household managerial work is largely due to the need to meet external requirements, such as the knowing a child’s school schedule and ensuring that they have everything they need for school and after-school activities, as well as communicating the daily schedule with other family members and making any necessary changes. In this mental labor, mothers often describe having and connecting all the details of both her own schedule and that of her family members. Of course, mistakes occur. Mothers often forget details like what their child needs to take to their next art lesson, making check-up appointments for their child, or other dates, events, and occasions. While going to the store to buy a gift for your child to take to a friend’s birthday party is not an effort, remembering to do it can be. As one mothers noted online,

I started finding that I needed a diary to get me through—me, who’d never needed that sort of thing before. I dropped to part-time work & still needed a diary—the housework dropped lower, I was still forgetting things (mainly inconsequential things, thank goodness), so I tried to concentrate on making sure things were written in my diary (jaden62, online comment, 2017).

More than three in four American mothers believe that it is their task to control their child’s schedule, with 86% affirming that they plan and organize the tasks of family members. In contrast, just 22% of American fathers consider it their responsibility to manage their children’s schedule (Bright Horizons, 2017). Indeed, mothers keep a mental calendar, make appointments, and generally make sure that every family member is where they should be at the right time (Bright Horizons, 2017). Mothers also know household details, like whether there are still things in the washing machine that need drying before tomorrow. Indeed, mothers are inundated with mental notifications like “Monday, kindergarten, our turn to bake a cake, buy a gift for Sophie’s birthday; Thursday, take dog to vet” and so on. Men rarely play the role of coordinator in the home—not because they are unable to or find such a role unimportant. Rather, the involvement of women frees men from these duties, saving them from the constant stress of having to plan, coordinate, manage, and negotiate household and family affairs.

norms and gender identity are characteristically stable and constant, they can change. The birth of a child in a family provides individuals with new opportunities for self-observation, which can significantly change their perception of their own gender identity. According to Burke and Cast (1997), parenthood strengthens gender differences between and gender identity of parents: fathers became more masculine and mothers became more feminine. However, depending on the degree to which men and women take on the roles of their partners, their gender identity can change toward that of their partner (Burke & Cast, 1997). This is because the appearance of a child increases the repertoire of roles—individuals become parents.

Gender identity and social norms have always and continue to strongly affect fathers. While men increasingly aspire to the commitments of “new fathers,” they continue to feel social pressures regarding their role as the main breadwinner. Fathers who stay at home with their children feel stigmatized due to the prevailing social belief that the role of primary caregiver is inappropriate for a man. Men have also been sidelined in hospitals following the delivery of their child. They also fear that finding suitable employment may be difficult due to the fact that they perform a traditionally feminine role (Harrington, van Deusen, Sabatini Fraone, & Mazaar, 2015). Certainly, dominant social norms have been demonstrated in the organizational culture of many companies that “punish” fathers for fulfilling the role of a parent by providing fewer chances of promotion and a lower income (Harrington, Fraone, Lee, & Levey, 2016). Many fathers have experienced unequal treatment in fulfilling parental tasks. As one woman noted online,

When my husband took L4 [sick leave in Poland—P.M.] for a sick daughter—women [sic] In the human resources department told him that it was probably rather abnormal for a man to take the leave, and not the mother (Ewa Firs, online comment, 2018).

In this regard, public debate and academic investigation have often overlooked that fathers often do not participate in childcare because of the attitude of their child’s mother.

## Maternal gatekeeping

In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), John Stuart Mill argued that men undermine their own words through their actions. While men argue that women are incapable of various actions and pursuits, they simultaneously seek to prevent women from attempting to do them. Mill suggests that this indicates that men know that women are capable of performing such tasks, but do not want them to. While defending women, Mill notes that a full understanding of what is natural for both sexes is

only possible if they are allowed to develop skills and do what they choose. I propose a thesis of “men’s subjection,” in which men face a reversal of the principle described by Mill in regard to childcare. Indeed, some modern women claim that men are incapable of certain tasks and want to stop them from attempting to do so. However, women know that men are capable of fulfilling such tasks, they simply do not want them to. Such attitudes can be described as “maternal gatekeeping.”

Gaining skills related to dealing with an infant requires commitment, time, and energy. As one father (Toby) noted,

Our lifestyle has changed completely, in ways for the better but it is a massive struggle, it’s like taking on another job almost because it has been very tiring, a lot of hard work, a lot of sleepless nights...the further you go back the worse it was...learning everything, being a dad for the first time everything is brand new (Machin, 2015).

Studies indicate that following the birth of their first child, fathers usually need about two years to fully adapt to the new role, while women usually take about six months. During this time, parents learn to accurately recognize their child’s needs. However, some fathers do not even attempt this undertaking, while some fail in the endeavor. This is typically due to their need to undertake paid work. Traditional social expectations push men toward being the primary breadwinner in a family. Together with such expectations, the organization of working time and social policy solutions make fathers the second choice parent. Sometimes fathers recognize that taking care of a child is not a “truly masculine” occupation. However, there are also those whose partners do not allow them to undertake such activities.

The term “gatekeeping” was coined by Lewin (1947), who used it to describe the practices of wives or mothers who ultimately decide what food will appear on the family table. A gatekeeper is a person who decides who or what can go beyond the, often symbolic, gate. An example of such a guard is the mythical Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the entrance to the land of the dead in Greek mythology. In regard to childcare, the term “maternal gatekeeping” is used to refer to the way in which mothers guard or even close the gate to childcare, thus limiting and excluding fathers from caring for a child (Fagan & Barnett, 2003). As such, gatekeeping is a set of beliefs and behaviors that can hinder the joint parental roles played by both partners (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Mothers play a key role in facilitating the relationship between fathers and their children (Arendell, 1996). Over the last two decades, several studies have indicated that there is a strong correlation between the desire to maintain full control over the care of the child and the amount of time that the father devotes to childcare. The more that mothers limit the father’s access to their children, the more time they take care of them. The groundbreaking study conducted by Allen and Hawkins (1999) identified maternal gatekeepers, a group comprising just over 20% of the

entire population. According to Allen and Hawkins (1999), these women perform approximately five hours more work per week for the benefit of the family and have less division of household labor in their homes.

Attempts to limit the role of fathers in childcare seems to contradict common sense and the theory of *homo economicus*. As noted earlier, if care is costly—both financially and in terms of energy and time—then reducing this load, at least temporarily, seems desirable. This prompts the question of why some mothers do not allow men to take care of their children. The literature provides several explanations (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Gaunt, 2008). First, women appreciate the intensity of their direct and exclusive relationship with the child. Even if it brings them tiredness and sleeplessness, they do not try to encourage fathers to even take over caring tasks. Men derive more from parenthood and see themselves as excellent fathers no matter how many times they change their child's diaper. The same cannot be said for some women. For them, being a real mother is inseparably connected to the performance of numerous tasks resulting from parenthood. In their view, a real mother gets up at night to care for their crying child, changes diapers, and takes care of their child's appearance. A man may do it, but he does not have to.

Second, women jealously "protect their area." According to the cultural ideals shaped and empowered over centuries, women are primarily perceived as caregivers and men as breadwinners. Consequently, the family, household, and childcare represents the woman's kingdom in which she has undivided power. As such, fathers undertaking part of the responsibilities associated with childcare is perceived a partial loss of autonomy and competence by some women (Hoffman & Moon, 1999). According to Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter and Small (2001), maternal gatekeeping is conducive to mothers feeling more competent and more emotionally connected to their children. Women's behavior is rooted within the social inequalities between the genders. In the public sphere, men more usually have a superior role, particularly in the economic sector. This is demonstrated in the fact that men typically hold more prestigious positions, are paid higher salaries, and receive promotion more quickly. Therefore, paid work often represents a tool by which women can increase their self-esteem. Consequently, childcare and household work are fields in which women are dominant, and in which they claim authority and enjoy a higher status. Gaunt's (2008) research unequivocally demonstrates that the lower a mother's self-esteem, the more they strive to maintain total control over the functioning of the home and family. Women with low self-esteem have a stronger maternal identity. Such women connect the performance of work for the family with the perception of themselves as a good mother, and thus believe that the home is solely a woman's domain (Gaunt, 2008). Many researchers suggest that gatekeeping is a means by which mothers protect their maternal, and thus female, identity (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008). Moreover, as Craig