Shaping moral norms of "good" parenthood and parenting across the reproductive process

Panel proposal for the Conference of the Swiss Association for Gender Studies 2023

Organisers and chairs (alphabetical order): Edmée Ballif (University College London and Rutgers University) and Veronika Siegl (University of Bern and University of Vienna)

Relevant axis:
- **Axis 2 - The institutional, interactional and performative work of (un)doing gender**
- **Other topics: Reproduction (this panel would resonate well with other panels on reproduction / procreative labour)**

This panel explores moral norms of "good" parenthood/parenting (in the sense of: appropriate, responsible and desirable). We build on recent scholarship that has shown how expectations to behave along what is considered "good" behaviour are increasingly extended to the period before birth to prospective and expecting parents. We explore how parents' behaviours are evaluated against moral, social and cultural norms at various moments across the reproductive process, from the pre-conception period, over pregnancy and childbirth (including, perhaps, pregnancy loss, still birth or abortion), up to the phase of childrearing. Papers will discuss "good" parenthood/parenting in relation to broader biopolitical agendas as well as in relation to intersectional differences and stratified reproduction, by looking at how such notions are morally shaped in institutional and professional contexts, such as birth centres, counselling centres, abortion clinics, tribunals, schools or (prospective) parents' workplaces.

We will explore by focussing specifically on the
- What kinds of labour goes into defining "good" parents? Who performs this labour and in which conditions? How is this moral labour gendered in itself?
- How are notions of "good" parenthood/ parenting linked to norms around gender, sexuality, race, citizenship, religion, class, dis/ability, age, etc.?
- Whose parenthood is deemed desirable and worth supporting, whose undesirable and not worth supporting?
- How are notions of "good" parenthood/ parenting linked to notions of risk, prevention and responsibility?
- How do (prospective) parents grapple with, accept, appropriate or contest moral norms of parenthood/ parenting?

Paper 1: "How did she get pregnant anyway?" About the (de-)legitimisation of motherhood in the Swiss asylum regime

Milena Wegelin, University of Bern and Bern University of Applied Sciences
Laura Perler, University of Bern

> "Once I was translating for a woman who was pregnant with the nursing staff at the Federal Asylum Centre. Afterwards, the nurse asked me: 'How did this woman get pregnant anyway? Why does she want to have sex, now, here in the shelter?'"
> (Interview with former translator at a federal asylum centre)

In 2021, around 54,000 refugees were in the process of seeking asylum in Switzerland. In the same year, 2,659 children were born to parents in the asylum process. While children are conceived and born in asylum, recent studies point to serious deficits in basic infrastructure and living conditions (collective housing, high prevalence of violence, lack of privacy, etc.). These deficiencies also lead to restrictions on self-determination with regard to sexuality and the organisation of peri- and post-natal life periods.

According to Loretta Ross Solinger, one of the founding members of the SisterSong collective, which coined the term reproductive justice, the question of who can be a legitimate mother is closely related to the question of who is considered legitimately sexual. We need to consider not only the right to become a parent or not, but also the right to have the basic living conditions. Starting from this idea, we look closely at the spaces, discourses and practices we have encountered in our research and ask how they relate to the limits of self-determination with regard to sexuality and motherhood in asylum.

In this presentation we will map discourses on and practices of motherhood in Swiss asylum. Based on ethnographic and participatory research, we will first show how the basic infrastructure of federal centres complicates self-determined sexuality as a precondition for motherhood: Federal centres are places where certain lives are systematically devalued, and pregnancy is not even considered an option due to intersectional discriminatory practices. Drawing on our ethnographic research and on interviews with professionals working in asylum centres, we then show how asylum seekers are perceived by staff in the federal centres in relation to their sexuality and their (potential) motherhood. In the final part, we show how women in the asylum process nevertheless negotiate their right to live their sexuality and motherhood, focusing on the a/effective work that goes into constructing their legitimacy as sexual beings and mothers.

Paper 2: Food, gender and the definition of good parenting in Switzerland

Edmée Ballif, University College London and Rutgers University

Food and feeding play a significant role in the social definition of "good" parenting, as evidenced by studies in parenting culture and feminist food studies. Parents often face intense scrutiny and conflicting advice on what to feed their children. This responsibility is often placed on mothers, reinforcing gender norms. Here, I am exploring the intersection of food with norms of good parenting when health experts do not approve of parents' food choices. A case study of child veganism in Switzerland illustrates how health experts advise against feeding children a vegan diet due to the potential for nutritional deficiencies. Through analysing medical texts and conducting interviews with medical experts, I find that vegan parents who choose to feed their children a vegan diet are often labelled as potentially abusive parents. However,

interviews with vegan parents reveal how they contest this labelling and frame their food practices as ethical, challenging fundamental aspects of the social order. This case highlights how even middle-class and well-educated parents (who are generally more valued in their parenting choices than poorer, minoritized parents) can be stigmatized and face negative labelling as bad parents but also have the agency to push back against this labelling. However, while vegan parents challenge traditional definitions of good parenting, they also reproduce gendered social orders, with mothers assuming most food-related tasks. The analysis contributes to an understanding of the intricacies of food cultures and gender regimes and, specifically, how both dietary and gender norms reinforce each other in reproducing traditional definitions of "good" parenting.

Paper 3: "Age-independent, but person-dependent" – Perspectives of healthcare professionals on "good" parenting in Switzerland

Nathalie Bettina Neeser, University of Basel

Co-investigators / co-authors: Tenzin Wangmo and Andrea Martani

More adults are becoming parents at advanced ages, defined as 40 years and older. Much research focuses on the physical risks of "older" mothers and children around birth. Little is known about the opinions and perspectives of healthcare professionals about the patients they support in becoming parents at advanced ages using assisted reproductive technologies. Although these healthcare professionals are the workforce supporting (aspiring) parents (of advanced parental age) in having one or even multiple children, their opinions and views towards these demographic changes are rarely investigated. To find out more about the perspectives of healthcare professionals in the context of assisted reproductive technologies, an explorative semi-structured interview study was conducted with a total of 16 participants in Switzerland. Participant's background and occupations varied across the reproductive field; including physicians, nurses, midwifes, psychologists, counsellors, and embryologists. Qualitative thematic analysis of the data show that the opinions of healthcare professionals vary as to what makes a parent a "good" parent. However, the study participants consistently emphasized that age is not the predominant factor determining a "good" parent. Instead, "good" parenthood is multi-faceted and cannot be pinpointed to one aspect of the parent(s) in question, such as age. The perspectives of healthcare professionals in this study hence relay that "good" parenthood depends on the person a parent is, rather than on a single aspect.

Paper 4: Gendered Constraints of Circular Labor Migration: Exploring the Intersections of Motherhood, Seasonal Labor, and Neoliberalism in Spain's Berry Industry

Nora Komposch, University of Bern

Each year, thousands of women from Morocco migrate temporarily to Spain to work in Huelva's berry industry, enduring deplorable working conditions while picking strawberries

for all of Europe. All these women are mothers of young children. This recruitment strategy is promoted by Moroccan authorities as a program for female empowerment and development. However, scholars have pointed out the geopolitical motives behind this approach, which includes ensuring the seasonal workers' return and preventing potential resistance from workers due to their family dependencies and financial necessities. Such neoliberal tactics of separating reproductive labor in the country of origin from productive labor in the host country are common in labor migration. However, this context deserves closer examination, as it involves a direct intersection of transnational labor migration policies with intimate matters of family and motherhood.

Feminist ethnographic research has revealed that neoliberal policies can reshape prevailing imaginations of maternal excellence and that the detriments of such policies disproportionately affect mothers, particularly those coming from marginalized racial and economic groups. According to a study on motherhood of workers in Huelva's berry industry, employers and policymakers construct an image of the compliant mother as the ideal worker, drawing on assumptions of maternal devotion and emotional attachment. The workers' own perception of 'good motherhood' and their own notions of caretaking have received less attention so far in this context of feminized labor migration. This presentation examines the entanglements between neoliberal policies, the circular migration of Moroccan workers and their perception of motherhood. Drawing on affectual methods in a multi-sited ethnography conducted in Spain and Morocco, I address the following questions: How do Moroccan workers experience family and motherhood during seasonal work arrangements in Spain? What changes occur in care work responsibilities during mothers' absence? How does seasonal labor affect female workers' perception of motherhood? And finally, which imaginations of 'good motherhood' influence these perceptions?

Paper 5: Becoming a 'Complete Mother': Affective Labour, Ibuism, and Maternal Citizenship in 'Natural' Birth Clinics in Bali, Indonesia

Molly Fitzgerald, University of Zürich

In this paper I show how 'good motherhood' is constructed through affective labour within the context of 'natural birth' clinics in Bali, Indonesia. Based on ethnographic research at birthing clinics that oppose the biomedical approach of the state and instead promise women a natural birthing experience, I explore the affective labour of both midwives and birthing women in this setting. The midwives argued that care should come 'from the heart' in order to facilitate the maternal becoming of women through birth. In accordance with this philosophy, birthing women often claimed to have achieved 'complete' motherhood by giving birth naturally and supported by loving midwives. On the one hand, these narratives fit with the conservative Indonesian gender ideology of Ibuism, which equates women with motherhood and thereby confines them to their reproductive abilities and the realm of the 'natural'. On the other hand, the clinics can be seen as spaces of empowerment that challenge Ibuism's emphasis on female subservience and compliance, as the women and midwives both highlighted the importance of autonomy and self-determination when it comes to birth. Within a context in which women's citizenship is in part contingent on their ability to become mothers, I argue that these clinics thereby offer women the opportunity to fulfil their maternal citizenship on their own terms, in a caring and empowering setting.