Journal of Family and Economic Issues
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-023-09931-x

ORIGINAL PAPER

Invested Mothering: An Intersectional Analysis of Mothers' Feminized Breadwinning Strategies Under State-Mandated Child Support Arrangements

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Accepted: 16 August 2023

Abstract
This article conceptualizes *invested mothering* to explain how mothers typically serve as both primary caregivers and financial providers under court-mandated shared parenting. A line of feminist literature has conceptualized hegemonic expectations of women's caregiving through the umbrella theory of intensive mothering, and family scholars have studied how these ideologies influence parental investments in children. I assert that more research is necessary at the juncture of this scholarship, especially in contemporary family forms which reflect most parents' reality. In this study, I analyze 46 in-depth interviews with parents under state-mandated child support arrangements as an empirical case of shared parenting experiences. I show that the onus is on mothers to secure financial resources for children's basic and enrichment needs through relational, paid, and invisible work strategies—mothers enact invested mothering. An intersectional analysis reveals the distinct invested parenting work that mothers, especially low-income Black mothers who are the most disadvantaged, perform as adaptive strategies in the face of interlocking sexism, systemic racism, and historical economic inequality. Overall, mothers' financial role as primary breadwinners is feminized as their contributions are unsupported, unacknowledged, and undervalued by both the courts and fathers.

Keywords Gender · Family · Motherhood · Child support · Qualitative methods

> Child support stops even though my children don't stop eating or anything.
> – Martina (low-income, White mother)

Society continues to position men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, despite women's increased labor force participation and fathers' involvement in childcare (Hochschild, 1989; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Mothering is considered an all-consuming, time-intensive, child-centered process. Mothers across social lines are expected to prioritize their children's needs and are held solely responsible for their children's well-being, complicated by employment status, class, and race (Christopher, 2012; Dow, 2019a; Hays, 1996; Randles, 2021). Yet I argue that additional research is necessary at the convergence of parenting ideologies and parental investments in contemporary family forms—beyond the elusive, romanticized heterosexual nuclear family with two biological parents that are either married or cohabiting (Coontz, 2000 [1992]). Over the past 50 years, children's living arrangements have shifted away from two parents residing together to one-parent, mother-led households becoming more common; this demographic trend has been historically and presently most pertinent to Black children's experiences (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Thus, child custody arrangements provide scholars with an empirical case to explore experiences of shared parenting arrangements under state-mandated child support. In such instances, the state serves as a facilitator between parents, often assigning mothers as primary custodial parents and fathers as payers of child support, reflecting a caregiver-breadwinner dichotomy. The reality, however, is

This is one of several papers published together in Journal of Family and Economic Issues on the "Special Issue on The Political and Economic Contexts of Families" Financial Lives.

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Published online: 09 September 2023

that only 45.9% of mothers receive consistent child support payments (Grall, 2020)—resulting in a gap not only in the social science literature, but also in the pockets of divorced and never-married mothers' pockets.

The conundrum at the tension between fathers' increased parenting involvement and mothers' increased paid work is: How do parents in shared parenting arrangements financially provide for their children under court enforcement? How do state-mandated child support arrangements compare to parents' lived experiences? I propose the concept of *invested mothering* to capture women's visible and invisible work to secure financial resources, such as basic needs (low-income) and enrichment activities (high-income), for their children in the face of state mandates. I argue that mothers with child support court orders—which normally cover only general, medical, and childcare expenses and not enriching experiences or services—are in fact primary financial providers, contrary to the payer-payee child support structure. However, mothers' contributions as primary breadwinners—whether in the form of relational labor (e.g., soliciting fathers' additional investment), paid work, or invisible work (e.g., taking on debt, managing public benefits, seeking community resources)—are feminized and thus devalued. Paradoxically, divorced and never-married mothers' financial contributions to their children in state-mandated child support arrangements are both obfuscated and assumed. The labor of such mothers to financially provide is considered incompatible with the breadwinner-caregiver dichotomy that underpins gender inequality in masculinity, marriage, and the cultural idealization of the two-parent, heterosexual nuclear family as the desirable family structure (Randles, 2018).

This article extends theoretical understandings of the gendered division of labor in parenting and the intergenerational reproduction of inequality through an intersectional analysis of parenting experiences under state-mandated child support arrangements. The everyday experiences of parents elucidate that the cost of the unequal, gendered division of financial support and caregiving is mothers wearing themselves thin (financially and emotionally) as they attempt to fill in economic gaps. Further, shared parenting financial arrangements perpetuate the reproduction of social class because high-income parents possess financial resources to invest beyond basic needs into enrichment activities that shape children's life chances, which extends previous research that demonstrates household income explains the entire difference for single parents and much of the gap for cohabiting parents (Hastings & Schneider, 2021). I engage in a critical intersectional analysis—a missing theoretical, conceptual, and methodological framework in family science (see Cross et al., 2022; Few-Demo, 2014)—to investigate how sexism, historical economic inequality, and systemic racism shape mothers' everyday experiences.

Thus, the empirical consequence of the undiscovered social phenomenon of invested mothering is that family courts continue to reproduce gender inequality, which leads women and children to lack the necessary financial resources, furthering economic inequalities. The theoretical consequence of this research is expanding scholarship (such as, Dernberger & Pepin, 2020; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020) that explores family processes via the interplay of the public and private sphere through gender as the main axis of differentiation. In other words, legal and cultural expectations of mothers' caregiving have been reconstituted to incorporate financial provision. The reconstitution of mothers' caregiving expectations collapses the public and private sphere into each other, which are already in conflict for women within an androcentric social landscape.

Literature Review

Mothering Ideologies

Although women's labor force participation has continued to increase, mothers overwhelmingly continue to shoulder childcare and caregiving work, including invisible work and cognitive labor (Daminger, 2019, 2020). Intensive mothering ideologies (Hays, 1996) place working mothers in precarious situations as they experience challenges in finding childcare and are perceived as incompetent at work, resulting in stressors, including work-life imbalance, guilt, overload, and career strain (Lamar & Forbes, 2020). At home, mothers' earnings are usually allocated to cover "women's work," such as childcare, family maintenance, and supplemental unpaid household labor (Pepin, 2019). Overall, women are held to a high standard both in caregiving and paid work with very little structural support (Blair-Loy, 2003; Collins, 2019; Damske, 2011; Hu, 2019). In short, mothers face a collision between the public and private sphere.

Mothers' experiences at the juncture of the public and private sphere differ by their social identities. Unmarried mothers have a stronger presence in the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Black and Latina women are less likely to have interruptions in paid work due to motherhood, which reflects patterns of financial self-reliance (Florian, 2018). Further, low-income mothers of color contend with growing inequality, a shrinking social safety net, and classed ideologies of motherhood to provide basic needs for their children. The receipt of public benefits is culturally perceived as antithetical to paid work because it defies the breadwinner-caregiver dichotomy of a

two-parent, heterosexual household (Evans, 2022). Inventive mothering, which extends from intensive mothering, demonstrates poor mothers' resourcefulness, innovation, and distinctive parenting strategies to protect their children from shame and stigma (Randles, 2021; for *defensive mothering* see Elliott & Bowen, 2018). Extant research that anchors itself in the intensive mothering theoretical strain, however, has overlooked the scholarly imperative examination of mothers' financial contributions to children in shared parenting arrangements under state-mandated father child support.

Parental Investments

Intensive parenting ideologies emanate into parental investments in children (Ishizuka, 2018). Today's parents contend with heightened perceptions of economic insecurity and inequality, and mothers are held solely accountable for children's financial security as adults (Cooper, 2014; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2019; Villalobos, 2014). High-income families have the economic opportunities to spend a larger proportion of their budget on children's education, enrichment activities, and resources (e.g., tuition, lessons, activities) than low-income families, whose income primarily goes to their children's basic needs (i.e., housing, utilities, food, and medical care). Further, married households possess the capacity to invest more money in their children than cohabiting and single-parent households due to their household income (Hastings & Schneider, 2021). Parental investments are explanatory mechanisms of income-based education achievement gaps, which have been found to be stronger indicators than race (Coley et al., 2016; Kornrich, 2016; Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013; Lareau, 2011; Reardon, 2011; Schneider et al., 2018). Thus, as research on parental investments burgeons, further attention to financial expenditures in shared parenting arrangements is required because children's living arrangements continue to shift, especially among marginalized diverse populations.

Centering Intersectionality

The elusive two-parent, heterosexual nuclear family (hereafter referred to as the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family) has been culturally and epistemologically reinforced in the U.S. as the default, desirable family structure. Social scientists have pathologized and documented detrimental effects on children who are raised outside of this family form (Coontz, 2000 [1992]; Smith, 1993). Yet this paradigm of research ignores that the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family was historically fleeting, with the 1950s representing an aberration from a diversity of family models (Coontz, 2000 [1992]). Further, the romanticizing of the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family ignores the social and structural privileges that are conferred to such arrangements that simultaneously intersect with White, heteronormative, and patriarchy privilege. The privileging of the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family reflects a disconnect between an idealized family form and the reality of family laws, anti-immigration policies, and historical, systemic racism and exclusion, particularly toward Black families (Letiecq, 2019; Williams, 2021). Family scientists have thus advocated for a new conceptual model that utilizes a critical intersectional lens to integrate structural racism and heteropatriarchy as macro-level factors *conditioning* family structure and child outcomes (Cross et al., 2022).

This conceptual and methodological shift in family science echoes the work of Black feminist intellectuals over the last forty years who have advocated for race, class, and gender to be analyzed as interlocking (Collins, 1990, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Few-Demo, 2014). An intersectional lens bolsters Black women's productive and reproductive experiences in relation to restructures in the state and economy (Brewer, 1999). More specifically, Black women's standpoint reveals a legacy of struggle against racism and sexism that has shaped Black mothering experiences of self-reliance and self-sufficiency (Collins, 1990; Dow, 2019b). In the face of economic inequality and stereotypes of poor, single Black mothers on welfare, "good" Black mothers are expected by their communities to work outside of the home, retain economic independence, and rely on childcare from kin as adaptive strategies, particularly to seek middle-class status (Dow, 2019a, b). Although both low-income and middle-class Black mothers confront many of the same parenting issues, low-income Black mothers are not able to leverage their class status to protect their children from racism and discrimination (Turner, 2020). Therefore, low-income Black mothers often turn to trading, hustling, and kinship support to fill in financial gaps (Brewer, 1999). As Black men face discrimination in the workforce, Black women are left with the lion's share of families' productive and reproductive work, while still receiving little state support (Brewer, 1999; Pager, 2003; Pager & Pedulla, 2015).

Child Support

One way in which state interference purports to provide families with financial support is through child support enforcement. Child support court orders reflect a critical empirical case study for the imposition of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family form and expectations, as well as how the state and men burden mothers with children's financial provision. In the U.S., less than half of all custodial parents, who tend to be mothers, receive consistent child support payments (Grall, 2020). Research demonstrates that

support award amounts are often below the actual cost of raising children (Venohr & Griffith, 2005) and the burden is on mothers to guarantee child support payments (Natalier et al., 2019). Low-income women express being unable to rely on both fathers' formal and informal support to financially provide for their children due to infrequent payments (Venohr & Griffith, 2005). The result of unpaid support for mothers includes anxiety and uncertainty, decreased levels of public assistance, long-term financial consequences (e.g., accumulating late payments), and shouldering all the financial provision while also being the primary caregiver (Harris, 2015). Custodial mothers—especially those who are low-income and on public assistance—are faced with administrative and accounting labor that has little payback to ensure that the state seeks compliance and collects child support from the nonresident father (Natalier et al., 2019).

Extensive research has explored the effects of child support debt on fathers (see Nepomnyaschy et al., 2021). Low-income fathers are mandated to pay a greater percentage of their income than other fathers—27% versus 16–19%, respectively (Huang et al., 2005). Low-income fathers have documented barriers to child support payment, including high-burden orders, competing obligations, negative experiences with the child support system, and strict enforcement measures (Vogel, 2020). They are more likely to provide support to their children through informal and in-kind support at an average of $60 worth per month; both forms of support hold emotional significance and are experienced as indicative of fathers' closeness with children (Kane et al., 2015; Waller et al., 2018). Nonresident fathers, regardless of social class, view their support as a gift, struggle with losing power over how mothers spend money, and believe their contributions are invisible to children (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014).

Child support payments in Michigan, the state where this study was conducted, are calculated using the Michigan Child Support Formula (MCSF) (MCSF Manual, 2021, see Chap. 3). The MCSF is intended to cover general, medical, and childcare needs by taking into consideration the parents' monthly income, income level, overnight parenting time (formerly known as "visitation"), and responsibility to any other children (MCSF Manual, 2021). The courts use a separate formula for parents who do not meet the "low-income threshold," and can exercise discretion with families with an "extremely high income," as well as in specific cases (MCSF Manual, 2021, see 1.04(E) Deviation Factors). Moreover, parents in Michigan who receive public benefits are mandated to cooperate with child support enforcement, which is also the case in other states such as New York (Waller, 2020). Although low-income families are likely to avoid formal court orders due to distrust in the legal system and competing frames (Sandefur, 2008; Waller, 2020), the compulsive structure of support orders for welfare recipients is likely to help explain the large proportion of low-income participants in this study.

Nested at the crux of mothering ideologies and parental investments, this study provides insight into parents' experiences of financially providing for their children under state-mandated child support by leaning on interviews with parents in Michigan. Below, I delineate the methodology leading to the invested mother concept, which demonstrates how the state and fathers jointly burden mothers as primary caregivers and financial providers—labor that is feminized, unsupported, and undervalued.

Methodology

To uncover parents' experiences financially providing for their children under court-ordered child support arrangements, I employ a qualitative approach by drawing on in-depth interviews. Although quantitative data provides an overview of de jure child support enforcement, a qualitative approach uncovers parents' practices and mothers' invisible work that is not documented or recognized by family courts. This study examines how parents make sense of their practices to contribute financial resources to their children under a child support arrangement, with special attention to the intersection of gender, social class, and race. More specifically, I interrogate:

1. How do parents in shared parenting arrangements financially provide for their children under court enforcement?
2. How do state-mandated child support arrangements compare to parents' lived experiences?

Recruitment

The data for this article come from a larger study. The larger study received approval from the corresponding institutional review board and had the following inclusion criteria: (1) parents who (2) had a current child custody court order for at least one minor child (3) under jurisdiction of the state of Michigan. For the current study, I drew on the narratives of parents who also reported having a current child support court order in Michigan for their child(ren).

Recruitment for the larger study sought to reach a diverse population by utilizing hard-copy and electronic flyers. Flyers were mailed across the state (e.g., Friend of the Court county offices, Head Start programs, and attorney firms); distributed in person in Southeast Michigan at locations frequented by parents (e.g., public libraries, doctors' offices,

the health department, laundromats, cafes, restaurants, and churches) and a local low-income community (e.g., public schools, job training programs, and community engagement organizations); and uploaded online to Craigslist, Instagram, and Facebook (e.g., moms' groups, dads' groups, and fathers' rights groups).

The flyer invited divorced, never married, and remarried parents in the state of Michigan to be part of a sociology research study and "[h]ave a *confidential* conversation about how you share parenting work with your child's other parent." The study was described as taking one to two hours at a place convenient to the participant, and as including a survey and interview, followed by provision of a participant incentive upon completion of the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask any questions prior to participating, provided consent to participate and be audio-recorded via a written consent form, and were provided with an incentive upon completing the study.[1] At the end of the interview, I discussed with participants the option to recruit their networks and their child(ren)'s other parent into the study. None of the participants recruited the other parent nor did I make this a requirement due to concerns over violence, power differences, and contentious relationships (Elizabeth et al., 2012; Waller et al., 2018).

Procedure

The larger study utilized an in-depth interview and short demographic survey. I conducted all the interviews (M = 68 min) in person (n = 38), unless respondents resided over two hours away (n = 7) or were interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 5), with fourteen different counties represented in the sample. I asked participants structured, open-ended questions with probes as needed for clarification and expansion. The interview included questions about participants' relationship with their child(ren)'s other biological parent (e.g., How would you describe your current relationship with your child's other parent?); how they shared parenting responsibilities with the other parent under the order (e.g., How closely do you follow your court order?); the emotional impact of their court case (e.g., How has the child custody court case and order affected you emotionally?); and any closing thoughts (e.g., Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you think is important to share with me?). To preserve conversational flow, I also provided participants room to narrate parts of their story they found significant. The short survey asked demographic questions about the parents, children, child custody court order, child support court order, and caregiving work (i.e., grooming, education, health care, and emotional support). Parents and children have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Participant Characteristics

Altogether, I conducted interviews and administered short surveys between 2018 and 2020 with 50 heterosexual parents who had a current child custody court order in the state of Michigan. For the current study, I draw from the 46 parents (32 mothers and 14 fathers) who reported having a current child support court order. From this subset of participants, 22 participants (48%) identified themselves as White, 15 (32%) as Black, four (9%) as Latinx, and five (11%) as multiracial. Participants' reports of their current marital status were as follows: 24 (52%) indicated that they were divorced, seven (15%) were remarried or married, and 15 (33%) were never married. Most participants had some type of college education with 26 (57%) holding a bachelor's degree or higher, 16 (35%) an associate degree or some college, two (4%) a high school diploma/GED or less, and two (4%) participants did not provide their highest level of education. Most participants (65%) reported an income under $50,000, and the remaining 35% reported an income higher than $50,000.[2] Parents reported that mothers had sole physical custody 61% of the time, parents had joint physical custody 35% of the time, and fathers had sole physical custody 4% of the time. Table 1 shows the sample descriptives.[3]

Analytic Approach

Below, I discuss how I performed an adaptation of abductive analysis with flexible coding tailored to solo-researcher coding (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Saldaña, 2021; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). As a solo author, the coding process was primarily an independent enterprise, as it is in most qualitative studies (Saldaña, 2021). Still, to establish trustworthiness of the data, I

[1] The participant incentive ranged from $15 at the beginning of the study to $40 for the last half of participants. I incrementally increased the participant incentive to expand visibility and thank participants for their time, especially those in precarious financial situations. The social class of participants diversified when the incentive reached $40.

[2] To operationalize social class, I took into consideration income, utilization of public benefits, and any other relevant information disclosed by participants. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), a family of four in Michigan was considered low-income at $51,300 or below.

[3] The participant characteristics are comparable to the Michigan population, although more racially diverse and educated. The U.S. Census Bureau (2022) estimates that 75% of the Michigan population is White, 30.6% of persons have a bachelor's degree, and the median income is $63,202. Among divorcing parents in Michigan, it is documented that 75% have a sole physical custody arrangement and 25% have joint physical custody arrangement (Michigan Department of Community Health, 2021).

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics (N = 46)

Characteristic	*n*	%
Gender		
Mother	32	70
Father	14	30
Race/Ethnicity		
White	22	48
Black	15	32
Latinx	4	9
Multiracial	5	11
Marital Status		
Divorced	24	52
Remarried/married	7	15
Never married	15	33
Education		
Bachelor's degree or higher	26	57
Associate degree or some college	16	35
GED/high school diploma or less	2	4
No response	2	4
Income		
Low-income	30	65
High-Income	16	35
Physical Custody		
Sole (mother)	28	61
Sole (father)	2	4
Joint (mother and father)	16	35

workshopped my coding of the data, wrote iterative memos through the analysis process, reflected on my positionality as the researcher, and leaned on participants' narratives to conceptualize invested mothering. To code, I imported professionally transcribed interviews into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 12 (now, NVivo Release 1.0). I affixed demographic attributes that participants reported on the short demographic survey to the interview transcripts: gender, income level, race, education, marital status, and physical custody.

Index Coding

For the first cycle of coding, I focused on the first ten interviews. I re-listened to select audio recordings, re-read my post-interview field notes and memos, and consulted with my faculty advisor to identify larger themes—the equivalent of index codes, which focus on broad topics to assist with data reduction for more focused coding (Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 726). Rather than rely on the interview questions, I broke down the data by how parents described themselves and each other: mom-mom (i.e., a mother describing herself), mom-dad (i.e., a mother describing her child(ren)'s father), dad-dad (i.e., a father describing himself), and dad-mom (i.e., a father describing his child(ren)'s mother). I also had two undergraduate research assistants individually perform the index coding. In team meetings, we discussed our memos on emerging themes related to how custody arrangements translated into daily life, as well as identified exemplar quotes that illuminated gender inequality in the division of parenting work (for "aha quotes" see Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 727). From the first cycle of coding and memos, I was able to develop four analytic codes, which provide a more focused reading of that data to be explored in single studies (Deterding & Waters, 2021, p. 722).[4] For this study, I used the analytic code "financially providing."

Analytic Coding

For the current study, I relied on the analytic code "financially providing"—more specifically, its subcode "after custody." The "financially providing" code compared how parents' financial arrangements adjusted to the child support court order. Based on participants' descriptions of how their financial arrangements shifted after the child support court order, I inductively identified two subcodes: "before custody" and "after custody." "Before custody" explored parents' financial arrangements prior to the child support court order, whereas "after custody" explored parents' financial provisions for children after the child support court order. Although the "before custody" subcode provided contextual details, I analyzed the "after custody" subcode for this study because it provided contrast between state-mandated child support arrangements and parents' lived experiences. For the "after custody" subcode, I coded portions of parents' narratives that reflected how parents financially provided for children's material needs (e.g., food, clothing, and housing) and enrichment (e.g., extracurricular activities), the sources they drew from, and the influence of child support enforcement on financial provision (including the parenting relationships). Throughout the analytic process, I wrote notes and memos about my thoughts, identified significant quotations, and consulted with senior scholars. The analysis of the "after custody" subcode reflected that mothers were primary caregivers, did not receive sufficient financial support from fathers, and had to request any additional funds directly from fathers; fathers, especially low-income Black fathers, disagreed with child support and held resentment towards their children's mothers. All of these findings culminated in the invested mothering concept.

[4] I did allow for more than one analytic code to be applied to data—also known as simultaneous, double, or overlap coding—because some portions of the data spoke to multiple themes (Saldaña, 2021, p. 124); for example, a father exercising inconsistent parenting time without prior notice (extra work) caused interruptions to a mother's paid work and her ability to financially provide (financially providing). Because I did overlap coding, important contextual results from other codes and sub-codes are included in this study.

Intersectionality and Reflexivity

Although I did not explicitly ask respondents, I did investigate how parents experienced invested mothering according to their social identities. More precisely, I examined qualitative differences by attributes (i.e., race and social class) *after* coding thematically across all transcripts to apply the analytic codes reliably. Then, I analyzed the data by gender at the intersection of social class and gender, while taking into consideration the social landscape (e.g., racism, racial stereotypes, and adaptive strategies). I acknowledge that my social identities enhance my ability to interpret data but may also unintentionally introduce bias. I identify as a Latina woman from a low-income background. My ethnic identity came up only once in interview discussions. A Latina mother noted that she decided to participate in the study due to my name on the flyer because, "I love to support our community, our people." Thus, it is difficult to postulate how my racial identity may have influenced the data collection; however, my data analysis was informed by sociological knowledge on gender, racial, and economic inequality rooted in cultural humility—a research approach to recognize diverse contemporary families' strengths (Stewart & Limb, 2020).

Although I grew up in a heteropatriarchal, nuclear family (albeit with immigrant parents), my current family form is marginalized as I am a single mother. At the time of the interviews, I was in my late twenties and I am usually read as young, so my parenting status to an elementary-school-aged daughter was ambiguous. I disclosed being a mother without a systematic approach: some participants asked, others had previous knowledge of me based on snowball recruiting, and sometimes it came up organically in conversation or during the interview (e.g., empathizing that replacing winter clothing for growing children is expensive). My experiences as a mother provide insight into the work involved in raising a child and the gender inequality that underpins parenting work. Still, I also do not have fathering experiences. I tried to be inclusive and inviting to both mothers and fathers by remaining neutral in my responses to participants' descriptions of their ex-partners and parenting work. I believe that I succeeded because some fathers, especially low-income fathers, expressed their desire for me to utilize this research to advance fathers' issues. In the results below, I lean on participants' narratives to conceptualize invested mothering.

Results

An intersectional analysis revealed that mothers in shared parenting arrangements were *both* the primary caregivers and financial providers, contrary to the structure of their formal child support orders. The child custody system ostensibly emulates the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family breadwinner-caregiver ideal via a payer-payee dichotomy. Yet participants' experiences suggest that both the state and fathers place the onus on mothers to secure children's financial resources. Most mothers described being entirely or primarily financially responsible. To meet their financial burdens, mothers across social classes and race/ethnicity engaged in strategies of relational, paid, and invisible work that I conceptualize as invested mothering. Mothers' strategies were unacknowledged and unsupported at both the institutional (i.e., legal recourse) and interactional (i.e., consistent childcare) levels. Fathers often employed various methods (e.g., residing outside of the U.S., allowing debt to accumulate, working under the table, wanting to pay outside of the formal court system, delaying reimbursements) enabled by the current court structure to remain absolved from their court-ordered financial responsibilities, which made mothers' role more challenging.

In addition, I found that the child support structure also ignored the lived inequalities that low-income parents and families of color grapple with. More specifically, Black mothers were the most disadvantaged as they had to navigate adaptive strategies of self-reliance in a society that stereotypes Black single mothers and entrenches them in poverty. Low-income Black mothers also had to contend with a greater proportion of fathers residing at a distance. Simultaneously, low-income Black fathers described precarious finances and misdirected their frustrations towards mothers. Black parents' experiences are constructed at the intersection of systemic, structural racism, sexism, and historical economic inequality.

Comprehensively, invested mothering reveals how feminized caregiving responsibilities in the private sphere have been reconstituted to also integrate breadwinning. Although 91% of mothers reported being the payee on their child support arrangement, 66% of mothers reported being primarily financially responsible for their children. Mothers' double-barreled caregiving-breadwinning role is ignored and obfuscated, while fathers are exculpated from their financial responsibilities yet retain their payer status. Table 2 shows how the reported child support court order arrangements compare to the experiences narrated by parents.

Relational Work

The court served as a conduit for parents' relationships. The current state structure placed the responsibility on mothers to seek child support enforcement from the court, as well as any additional monetary contributions directly from fathers. Mothers were met with limited to no compensation for their enforcement labor. The legal system has shifted the financial

Table 2 Child Support Descriptives (N = 46)

Characteristic	Reported by	*n*	%
Reported Child Support Arrangements			
Payee	Mothers (n = 32)	29	91
Payor	Fathers (n = 14)	13	93
Narrated Financial Experiences			
Primarily Financially Responsible	Mothers (n = 32)	22	66
Utilized Public Benefits	Low-income Mothers (n = 20)	11	55
Received Erratic Payments	Black Mothers (n = 10)	8	80
Father Residing Afar	Black Mothers (n = 10)	4	40
Experienced Courtroom Bias	Low-income Black Fathers (n = 5)	4	80

burden squarely onto mothers, regardless of their own financial positions and challenges, which requires relational labor to secure fathers' investments. High-income mothers performed direct relational work that saved the courts bureaucratic labor. Low-income mothers deployed more invisible relational labor by exercising empathy and understanding toward fathers' financial position; they expressed reluctance to request fathers' contributions and feelings of intimidation by the court system. Black mothers, regardless of income, bore the brunt of fathers' frustrations with a racist state.

High-income mothers predominantly reported the relational work they had to perform to informally secure additional funds from fathers, as well as the emotional and time cost of this labor. Madeline was a high-income White mother who shared a son, Liam (age 6), with her ex-husband, Nate (high-income, White). Madeline reported that their child support order specified a percentage each parent was to cover, respectively, for school, childcare, and extracurricular activities—expenses not normally factored into the child support formula. The parents' income privilege enabled them both to contribute monetarily, but the reimbursement responsibility had fallen primarily on Madeline:

> The main issue that I have is that I feel like I'm not paid on time.… I think he kind of picks and chooses what he wants to pay first. What's higher and it's like, just pay it, just get it done.… And then he doesn't wanna do it via the bank, to use the bank system where we can pay immediately from one account to the other which is great, in my opinion, but he doesn't wanna do that so he wants to actually hand me a check which is really annoying.… I feel like that giving a payment, at least on his part, he's just like, "I'm not, I don't wanna give you money," you know. [chuckle] I feel like there's that emotional thing behind it.

Madeline's experiences as an invested mother reveal the tactics that high-income fathers engaged in to shift the financial burden onto mothers and assert their will. The interpersonal reimbursement system—which absolved the court from any labor to facilitate this part of the financial relationship—afforded Nate discretion over when, what, and how to financially contribute towards Liam's enriching activities. Nate's evasive behaviors exemplified attempts to make the reimbursement process more challenging and highlighted the emotions it invoked for him. The above quote suggests that Nate had an emotional reaction because he interpreted the money as being for Madeline personally, rather than repayment for his child's expenses. Although high-income White mothers had more financial resources, they were still required to perform relational labor to guarantee fathers' economic support for items outside of the child support order that contributed to children's enrichment.

Low-income mothers recounted their support for fathers' financial well-being. Michelle was a low-income White mother who shared a son, Mikey (age 11), with her ex-boyfriend, Joel (low-income, Black and Latino). Michelle explained how Joel's monthly child support obligation had been set at the low amount of $46 per month, which she reported he did not pay:

> I had got a notice from the Friend of the Court that we had to come in for an appointment and this was actually right around the time I got notice that I was going to lose my job in 60 days, but I didn't tell the Friend of the Court that because I felt too intimidated. I just said, "Well, he's getting ready to be out on his own, and I don't wanna ask for too much support, 'cause I wanna give him a chance to get on his feet." And that's why they made the child support so low, but I really regretted it, because now all these years he's pretty much gotten away with not paying. And he's lived a life of fun while I struggle to provide, and I only sporadically get money from him for my son.

Michelle's narrative exemplifies the emotional cost low-income mothers shouldered to seek financial support through their interactions with the court system: intimidation, regret, and struggle. Although not a direct interaction with Joel, Michelle performed relational labor by choosing not to seek a higher, fair support amount in order to provide him an opportunity to "get on his feet." Yet Michelle

was Mikey's primary caregiver and provider, and she was in a precarious financial position herself. During the interview, Michelle also shared that Joel wanted to pay sporadic amounts of child support outside the support system, a technique to maneuver their formal arrangement. Thus, Michelle's experiences highlight how the court presumes mothers will be able to provide for children regardless of the level of father's financial contributions, while fathers assume the title of payers without fulfilling their financial roles.

Low-income and, especially, high-income Black mothers described the resentment fathers placed on them due to their financial obligations and feelings that their contributions were not recognized. As a result, Black mothers not only had to perform relational labor, but did so within a contentious context. However, analyzing low-income Black fathers' accounts reveals the state racism they faced, which the fathers often mistook as gender bias. Amara was a high-income Black mother who shared a son, Kade (age 7), with her ex-boyfriend, Otis (low-income, Black). When I asked Amara what the worst thing was about having a child custody court order was, she explained:

> I think just because I know he's struggling financially, because it's tied with child support and I know that he struggles financially. I get it is hard out here, especially right now with COVID happening. And we are getting this relief check, and his is gonna be taken because he owes back support and I know that it probably would really help him right now. That I feel like is hard for me to deal with 'cause I feel guilty. But it needed to be done.

Amara's account reveals that Otis struggled financially. It also highlights her invisible relational labor of grappling with guilt because Otis's COVID-19 relief check was going to be garnered to cover some of his child support debt—money that she required for Kade. Given Otis's reported $9,000 child support arrearage, Amara would not have received financial support without the automated check garnishment.

The low-income Black fathers I interviewed described frustration with their children's mothers. However, a deeper analysis revealed that they were confronting a racist court system and their anger towards mothers was wrongly directed because they viewed their financial obligations as a court gender bias issue. Jay was a low-income Black father who felt the state was biased against fathers. He shared two children, Tanya (age 9) and Rico (age 8), with his ex-girlfriend, Brittany (low-income, Black). When I asked Jay, how he felt about child support, he explained:

> [Brittany] don't want me to send them anything, you want me to pay child support to hand you money. So instead of you buying my son nice clothes, you buy him bullshit clothes. Instead of you signing them up for the activities, you sign them up for nothing. But you buy you new stuff. And now, I'm contributing to your rent. But you told the court you could take care of them better that I could.

The quotation above highlights that Jay preferred in-kind gifts, primarily focused on directly supporting his children and less on their day-to-day material needs. Rather, he viewed child support as money being utilized by Brittany for "new stuff" and *her* rent. It also echoes his and other low-income Black fathers' sentiments that the courts were biased against fathers (i.e., the court appointed Brittany primary caregiver), who, at least in the fathers' own opinion, could "take care of [their children] better."

Overall, the relational work performed by mothers across social class and race/ethnicity highlights how the state structure and fathers in concert forge mothers into becoming both primary caregivers and breadwinners. As demonstrated above, the integration of both burdens came at a high cost for women: time, energy, and emotional management (of self and of the father). Mothers engaged in strategies of paid and invisible work, while facing uphill challenges at both the institutional and interactional levels.

Paid Work

Mothers across social class and race/ethnicity primarily engaged in paid work as a strategy to fulfill their role as financial provider, which fathers made challenging by limiting and omitting their childcare. High-income mothers' economic status afforded them the ability to cover their children's basic expenses and more, such as extracurricular activities, that they funded with their paid work income. Low-income mothers described working extensively, often stretching themselves thin to make ends meet.

Some high-income mothers had financial collaboration from fathers to an extent and were able to afford children's expenses due to their own financial standing. Kelsey was a high-income White mother who shared a daughter, Jane (age 14), with her ex-husband, Paul (high-income, White). When I asked Kelsey if anything fell through the cracks, she detailed:

> Well, in general, her dad handles school-related expenses, and I handle clothing. And that's just how we have informally divided that up so that we don't have to total up all those things and split them. But this past weekend she was working on an art project, and

> she said, "My dad was supposed to get me pens, and I don't have the pens I need to do my art project." So I went and got them, which I'll then total up and add to what he owes me at the end of the month…. So we both total the expenses and then typically he pays me, so… Typically, he owes me for expenses at the end of the month in addition to child support.

Kelsey's recount demonstrates that Paul played a significant financial role by paying child support and handling school expenses. Still, Kelsey took on the primary financial role by covering for any financial expenses that fell through the cracks (including those contributing to enriching educational experiences). She was able to do this as needed with her income from paid work. As delineated in the previous section, mothers had to perform relational labor to receive a repayment for their financial investments.

However, high-income Black mothers primarily found that they unilaterally had to cover children's financial expenditures. For example, LaToya was a high-income Black mother who shared two children, Avery (age 3) and Angelo (age 1), with her ex-husband, Bryan (income not reported, Latino and White). LaToya was employed full-time and leaned on her income to fulfill the role of primary breadwinner:

> Everything that they need, I pay for…anything we do that's outside of clothing, food, utilities, I pay everything. I pay everything…Because he thinks he doesn't have to pay. So when the kids are at his house, he's supposed to have their clothes, their food, …the one-year-old's diapers and everything. And so he for some reason thinks I'm supposed to pay for stuff in my household and pay for stuff in his household. It's a constant battle because he feels like…he shouldn't have to pay.

During the interview, LaToya reported that Bryan had an accumulating child support debt, and her narrative above demonstrates that Bryan also believed that she should subsidize the children's expenses (e.g., food, clothing, diapers) at his household, as well. Part of Bryan's attempts to deflect economic responsibility was that he resented LaToya for his legal financial obligation—or, as she put it, "The system is my fault, everything is my fault." Thus, although Bryan was the official child support payer, ideologically the "breadwinner," the onus fell squarely on LaToya to secure her children's material well-being. Other mothers in the sample similarly described providing for their children's material needs during fathers' parenting time: e.g., providing allergy-friendly food and opening their homes with access to food to fathers. Without mothers' high-income paid work, children would miss out on basic material needs *across* households, as well as opportunities for enriching experiences.

Without low-income mothers' extensive paid work, children would go without any basic material needs. Martina was a low-income White mother who shared two daughters, Faith (age 13) and Arielle (age 12), with her ex-boyfriend, Carter (low-income, White). Carter had been placed on child support payments after Martina applied for public benefits. Martina reported that she had asked the state to pardon $30,000 of child support debt due to Carter's incompliance. To financially support the girls, Martina worked extensively:

> Well, I'm down to two jobs now. But for a while, I was at three. So some days I would work at the hospital, then go to the restaurant, then got to the bar, literally in one day's time. So I'm home a little bit in between just enough to change.… And now that I don't have the bar anymore, I should begin to start having Sundays off. But that's just changed as of last week. Before that, it was a lot of I'm at the hospital all day, I'm at the restaurant all night, and then it's come home and change and go to the bar.

Martina divulged that during her relationship with Carter, she was the financial provider. Indeed, Carter had gone as far as to steal her car and credit cards. After their breakup, Martina continued to find herself as the girls' primary caregiver and breadwinner, as Carter had been incarcerated. Her statement above illustrates the work weight she continued carrying after his release by working three different jobs at three different locations: hospital, restaurant, and bar. Such extensive paid work punctuates mothers' conflict and struggle to independently fulfill the roles of caretaker and financial provider. Working extensively requires childcare and reduces mothers' ability to spend time with their children.

Low-income Black mothers also found that they had little financial support from their children's fathers. Riley was a low-income Black mother who shared a son, Andre (age 1), with her ex-boyfriend, Devon (low-income, Black). Riley narrated how, as the sole breadwinner for Andre, she had to work sometimes 20 h a day while facing childcare barriers to her paid work:

> I have to do everything by myself…my mom, she works at the hospital, she does 12 h at [the hospital] so it's hard for her to help me. My sister goes to school, and she works. So it's hard when you don't have a lot of help, and I have to go to work because I have to take care of him. Well, see, my child support is only 60 bucks… Only got child support three times, my baby will be two next month. Yeah, so I really don't rely

> on child support, because it's not enough money, even when I do get $60, that's just a box of diapers, so it's really not a help for me…. He feels he shouldn't have to pay the 60 bucks of child support, and he'll just take care of his son. But I've never saw that, so I don't wanna try it.

Riley's account elucidates that she became Andre's breadwinner because Devon's low child support amount only covered a box of diapers and he was incompliant with payment. Further, she disclosed not having childcare support from Devon, although he claimed he would have rather exercised parenting time than pay child support. Her language of "I have to take care of him" encompasses how her caregiving and breadwinning roles were collapsed into one. Although Riley leaned on family support for childcare, as Black women have historically done, her mother and sister also had their own economic and educational demands. Therefore, Riley's experiences as primary caregiver-breadwinner highlight the difficulties mothers faced to fulfill their obligations with few structural resources and little interpersonal support (e.g., childcare) from fathers.

Invisible Work

Mothers still had to financially provide regardless of whether child support enforcement cooperated or fathers economically contributed. As Martina, a low-income White mother, stated in the epigraph of this article: "Child support stops even though my children don't stop eating or anything." Yet low-income mothers were often unable to mitigate the lack of consistent or sufficient paternal support with their own income, and this required them to perform invisible work to fill in financial gaps. Low-income mothers described strategies—often invisible to the state and to the fathers—that they deployed to guarantee children's basic material necessities. Mothers' invisible invested work included applying to public benefits, drawing on community resources (e.g., food pantries and church donations), being innovative about funding sources (e.g., participating in research studies, withdrawing from retirement accounts, amassing credit card or student debt), and tapping into scholarships and subsidies.

Cheryl was a low-income multiracial (Latina and White) mother who shared two children, Milo (age 9) and Luna (age 7), with her ex-husband, Wyatt (high-income, White). Cheryl described that, prior to their divorce, she and Wyatt had embodied the caregiver-breadwinner dichotomy; after their divorce, Wyatt had gone through a bipolar manic episode that forced her into being the financial provider. When I asked Cheryl how she was now financially managing, she exclaimed:

> Not well. [laughter] Massive credit card debt, massive. Massive credit card debt. I did cash out of [retirement]…. you pay an enormous tax penalty. [chuckle] It's so much, borrowing from my future…it's also hard to go from not worrying about money to, "You dummy. You can't eat at the Roadhouse [restaurant] every Monday." [laughter]… I'm trying to learn, "No, you're a single mom, you should probably apply for cheap, these kinds of things and shop at Aldi [supermarket]. Yeah. So but yeah, I would say not doing well financially, but luckily I know that the kids will always be provided for… Someone in our village, they're the only grandkids really other than the new baby. So we have a lot of grandparent support locally.

Demonstrated in her report above, Cheryl engaged in several invisible work actions to fulfill her role as financial provider, which was a shift from her marriage: borrowing from her future (i.e., amassing credit card debt and cashing out of retirement with tax penalties), altering her parenting practices (i.e., eating out less and shopping at low-price grocery stores), and leaning on her kin-network (e.g., grandparents). The double-barreled role of caregiver and financial provider put mothers at a disadvantage, as they depleted their future resources while simultaneously decreasing their current quality of life.

While there were several overlaps in low-income mothers' experiences across race and ethnicity, low-income Black mothers' narratives highlighted how the additional labor they faced was shaped by the historic underpinnings of sexism, systemic racism, and economic inequality. Low-income Black mothers reported in greater proportion than low-income White mothers that fathers lived at a distance (i.e., lived abroad, lived out-of-state, or were incarcerated), which posed a substantial barrier to payment compliance. For example, Jalisa was a low-income Black mother who shared a son, Dylan (age 7), with her ex-husband, Fabian (low-income, Black). Jalisa became Dylan's sole caregiver and provider because Fabian resided abroad, which enabled him to avoid paying child support with an accumulating debt. When I interviewed Jalisa, she was multitasking (i.e., engaging in her paid work, eating lunch, and participating in this *paid* research study), further demonstrating the resourcefulness she went on to describe:

> Last time I was navigating the [welfare] system as a homeless teenager. Now I'm navigating it as a parent who has to think about somebody else. So I just had to get better at that, and found different programs where I can just get help, specifically with childcare. I made friends with people in the community, like his pre-school teachers and stuff like that, so I could have

> childcare outside of school, so it just took a lot of hustling, pretty much. Just thinking about all that effort and work I went into just to be able to stay afloat, it still frustrates me, and I don't like talking to him about it, 'cause I'm like, you over here taking pictures, literally backpacking through Europe, at wine vineyards, and doing all this leisurely lovely things while I'm busting my butt over here.

Jalisa's experiences speak to "all that effort and work" that low-income mothers deployed when faced with sole financial burden. Low-income mothers engaged in multiple invisible work strategies and "hustling," including applying to public benefits, drawing on community resources, and creating connections. Still, Black mothers reported in greater proportions than White mothers that they had ex-partners who resided geographically at a distance. In addition, throughout the interview, Jalisa talked about the stereotypes of poor Black single mothers she attempted to negate, while also trying to construct her own self-reliant narrative of not needing any financial (or physical) support from Fabian. Thus, while Jalisa navigated the role of invested mothering, becoming further entrenched in poverty, Fabian exempted himself from providing financial assistance and engaged in "leisurely lovely things" by maintaining geographical distance.

Black mothers also performed invisible labor because of the systemic inequalities that low-income Black fathers faced, which created further financial gaps. For instance, Charlene was a low-income Black mother who shared two children, Josiah (age 8) and Isla (age 7), with her ex-boyfriend, Theo (low-income, Black). Charlene was launched into being the sole caregiver and breadwinner during Theo's five-year incarceration period, which had ended a month prior to our interview. Charlene shared the actions Theo took to be financially supportive: "About around this time of the year, Christmas, he would always sign them up with the Angels, made sure they had Christmas presents. Made sure they had coats and boots. He would always sign them up for things." Still, to facilitate Theo's provision through a Christmas gifting program for incarcerated parents (i.e., Angels), Charlene had to absorb the invisible and visible financial, energy, and emotional costs of transporting the children to Theo's place of incarceration—a four-hour round trip. At the time of her interview, Charlene was also coping with the long-term financial ramifications of Theo's incarceration by waiting for him to become economically established, find employment, and secure his own place of residence—all life course events complicated by having a criminal record. Charlene's coping required invisible invested mothering strategies, such as drawing on resources (e.g., food pantry) at the children's school, highlighting how low-income Black mothers' financial provision was made heavier by the systemic inequality that low-income Black fathers grappled with.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the invested mothering concept and elucidate the intersectional experiences of parents under a child custody court order. More specifically, the invested mothering concept unearths how the state and fathers have jointly reconstituted mothers' caregiving responsibilities to also integrate breadwinning. Drawing on interviews with parents, I illuminate the relational, visible, and invisible work strategies mothers performed. High-income parents reported more shared financial expenditures due to their ability to absorb expenses and a facility to focus on enrichment activities. Low-income parents struggled to cover basic expenditures, with many mothers describing stressors and differences in quality of life compared to fathers. In line with foundational and contemporary frameworks of intersectionality, I found that low-income Black mothers were the most disadvantaged as they grappled with interlocking systems of sexism, racism, and economic inequality. Overall, women's invested mothering strategies are ignored and obfuscated because they do not fit masculine norms of paid work—in short, mothers' financial contributions are feminized.

Unless requested and agreed upon by parents, the structure of child support normally does not consider expenses beyond "basic needs." This category of unconsidered expenses is expansive and often unpredictable, including extra-curricular activities, recreation (such as school dances), orthodontic treatments, cell phone bills, and other unexpected expenses that arise with raising children—leaving it up to parents to figure out these financial considerations. High-income parents are more likely to have the financial resources to navigate these types of negotiations and afford extra expenses (Waller, 2020). Because children are primarily in mothers' care, basic and extra expenses inevitably fall onto mothers, who must request fathers' collaboration and contributions. As custody arrangements have been documented by researchers to be unequal locations of power in and out of the courtroom (Elizabeth et al., 2012), women are seeking cooperation from fathers in an already unequal playing field. Although child support may give the illusion of a heteropatriarchal, nuclear family dynamic, a deeper analysis distills women's sustained contributions undergirding U.S. families.

Mothers are expected to financially provide for children without interactional, formal, structural recognition from courts or childcare support from fathers, which perpetuates

gender inequality in parenting relationships. Social gender expectations continue to posit men as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers based on the romanticized heteropatriarchal, nuclear family configuration, despite women's increased labor force participation. While men have become more involved fathers, the amount and type of caregiving they provide has not extended at the same rate as mothers' employment (Wall & Arnold, 2007); further, certain tasks (particularly invisible work and cognitive labor) continue to be feminized and unequally carried out (Daminger, 2019).

This research extends understandings of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and its offshoots—including extensive (Christopher, 2012), integrative (Dow, 2019a), defensive (Elliot & Bowen, 2018), and inventive (Randles, 2021) mothering—which explore mothers' physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive labor. In child support arrangements, men continue to impersonate being breadwinners via the payer status. Fathers' tactics to deflect their financial obligations and maneuver interactions with mothers is further complicated by race and social class. Black mothers are financially impacted by the economic precarity that low-income Black fathers face due to systemic racism. Still women invisibly, de facto account for financial work in the private sphere. This unequal division of economic responsibilities in shared parenting within the private sphere is further complicated by the inequality women face in paid work within the public sphere.

Without women's paid and unpaid work, children would not have access to basic material needs (sometimes at both households), public benefits, and, potentially, enriching activities that contribute to the reproduction of social class. Children's financial outcomes as adults are burdened onto mothers during these precarious economic times, which often involves a concerted cultivation parenting approach that requires extensive monetary and time investments towards educational and extracurricular activities (Cooper, 2014). And all the while, mothers' paid work and caregiver demands conflict with each other, especially in the U.S., which lacks universal childcare, health care, parental leave, family accommodations, and an adequate public safety net (Collins, 2019). Together, the study results demonstrate a collision between the public and private sphere through the interplay of finances and family.

The family has been constructed as a privatized location of care, responsible for the (economic) well-being of its individuals, with women as caregivers being regulated by the state, particularly the most disadvantaged—low-income women of color (Abramovitz, 2017; Cooper, 2017). Consistent with radical feminist legacies (Butler, 2002; Lewis, 2022), fissures in the hegemonic nuclear family ideology—including divorce and shared parenting—provide opportunities for relationships of care to be reinvented and reconceptualized beyond the patriarchal, privatization of care. Yet despite contemporary family formations representing diverse constellations, the state continues to hinge parent-child relationships on biological ties (vis-à-vis essentialist law) and implicitly emulates the breadwinner-caregiver dynamic without fully investigating the follow through of responsibilities.

This study illuminates that mothers are faced with colliding ideological expectations of intensive motherhood and practical considerations of shouldering the lion's share of financial responsibilities for their children—in short, invested mothering. These competing responsibilities further entrench women in a social terrain riddled with gender inequality. As scholars, we can imagine that the unequal distribution of financial provision was most likely exacerbated during the pandemic, when women found themselves having to reduce their paid work while also having to facilitate virtual learning (Brittingham, 2022).

Acknowledgements I am deeply grateful to Karin Martin for her unwavering support and guidance throughout the research process—from beginning to end. Thank you so much for your feedback and suggestions on my multiple drafts, outlines, and ideas. I would like to thank the co-editors and anonymous reviewers for their engaging and thoughtful comments that elevated the quality of the manuscript. I am also grateful for the feedback I received on a previous draft of this paper from the U-M Gender & Sexuality workshop, especially Erin Cech and Paige Sweet, and my colleague, Matthew Alemu. Sofia Dara provided research assistance, particularly with data organization and management, for this study. A previous iteration of this study was presented at the 2021 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in the family section.

Funding Open access funding provided by SCELC, Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium

Data Availability To protect participants' privacy and maintain their confidentiality, the data analyzed during the current study are not publicly available.

Statements and Declarations The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article. This research was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) and human research participants provided written consent. The research leading to these results received funding from grants at the University of Michigan including the Rackham Graduate Student Research Grant and Department of Sociology Dissertation Grant.

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