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Jessica K. Crowell

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From collective struggle to individual hustle: gig work and neoliberal feminism in *Working Mother* magazine

Jessica K. Crowell

Digital Media and Journalism, State University of New York at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This article traces coverage of gig work in the U.S. magazine *Working Mother* from the 1970s to the 2020s. The study uses critical discourse analysis to conduct a comparative historical examination of 289 articles, focusing on how coverage of gig work and feminist themes evolves. Whereas early issues of the magazine align closely with second-wave feminist principles, such as encouraging women to pursue collective solutions for social change and compete with men for jobs, later issues embrace neoliberal themes of self-reliance, hustle, and gendered entrepreneurialism. In addition to encouraging risky and exploitative working arrangements, such as in multilevel marketing, *Working Mother* reinforces traditional gender roles and forecloses discussion of the structural inequalities that push mothers into the gig economy in the first place.

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Introduction

Mass media—such as magazines—play an important role in shaping cultural conversations about mothers and work. For example, popular magazines like *Ms*. (co-founded by Gloria Steinem), *Spare Rib*, and *Off Our Backs* in the 1970s served as a connective tissue for feminist labor movements, speaking directly to working women about the issues that affected their lives and amplifying feminist messages (Agatha Beins and Julie R. Enszer 2013; Amy Erdman Farrell 1998; Joanne Hollows 2013; Joy Michelle Jenkins and Erika Katherine Johnson 2017; Einat Lachover 2021; Gaye Tuchman 2000). Indeed, magazines like *Ms*. invited women to take an active part in fighting for structural and governmental reform, pairing provocative pieces on issues like reproductive rights with examples of how women could mobilize for change (Jenkins and Katherine Johnson 2017, 273; Eleanor Smeal and Gloria Steinem 2023). Yet many mainstream feminist and feminist-leaning magazines later moved away from portraying working women as agents of change and instead emphasized self-help and personal growth topics (Courtney Bailey 2003; Farrell 1998; Rosalind Gill 2009; Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2018; Jenkins and Katherine Johnson 2017; Kati Kauppinen 2013; Anna Lebovic 2019). In other words, many feminist and feminist-leaning magazines shifted away from second-wave ideals of collective action to achieve parity in the workplace and toward individualist feminist paradigms (Gill 2009; Gill and Orgad 2018; Kauppinen 2013; Lebovic 2019).

CONTACT Jessica K. Crowell crowellj@newpaltz.edu Department of Digital Media and Journalism, State University of New York at New Paltz, 1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561, USA

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This ideological reorientation was not isolated and should be understood as occurring in parallel with the growing discourse of neoliberalism. Emerging in the late twentieth-century, neoliberalism was a governing rationality that reconfigured social and economic life around market logics and personal "entrepreneurial freedoms" (David Harvey 2005, 2). This shift also reshaped feminist discourse by privileging personal solutions over structural critique. Represented in popular media like Ivanka Trump's *Women Who Work* or Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, neoliberal feminism is a strain of feminism less focused on "political goals such as equality, justice, and emancipation" and instead insists women and mothers should address workforce imbalances through self-management or by cultivating flexibility (Catherine Rottenberg 2019, 3). In other words, neoliberal feminism functions as a cultural framework that privileges values like autonomy, presenting women's participation in an increasingly precarious economy as a project of empowerment. More specifically, it positions gig work—work organized through short-term contracts or platforms and lacking employee benefits—as an appealing path for mothers seeking to reconcile their caregiving responsibilities with paid employment (Monica Anderson, Colleen McClain, Michelle Faverio and Risa Gelles-Watnick 2021).

There has been growing scholarly interest in how gender impacts contemporary working arrangements in the gig economy, including the experiences of caregivers like mothers (Arianne Renan Barzilay and Anat Ben-David 2016; Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska 2017; Al James 2022; Haley Kwan 2022; Ruth Milkman, Luke Elliott-Negri, Kathleen Griesbach and Adam Reich 2021). Indeed, studies suggest that, for women, caregiving is a chief motivation for entering informalized work (Hyperwallet 2017; James 2022; Siddharth Suri and Mary L. Gray 2016). Yet across sectors, many women articulate their insecure work through the language of entrepreneurialism (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017; Jessica Pearce 2023). Popular media often reinforces these normative understandings, praising "mumpreneurs"—mothers engaged in precarious work—for demonstrating qualities like self-reliance or simply hustle (Kim Allen and Kirsty Finn 2024; Jo Littler 2017, 15; Tressie McMillan Cottom 2020).

Despite increasing academic attention to issues of gender and the gig economy, there has been little longitudinal examination of the role popular culture plays in naturalizing and valorizing precarious work to women and mothers. Given that previous research has demonstrated that magazines function as critical media through which dominant values are conveyed to women, they can serve as a significant site for mapping shifting discourses around work (Farrell 1998; Gill 2009; Hollows 2013; Kauppinen 2013; Lebovic 2019; Mary Ellen Zuckerman 1998). Although there are a few notable exceptions (Lachover 2021), research examining how magazines frame gender and casualized work remains limited. This article intends to fill this gap through tracing coverage of gig and freelance work in the feminist-leaning U.S. popular magazine *Working Mother* from 1978–2021. The study uses critical discourse analysis to examine 289 articles, focusing on how gig work and feminist themes shift over time. In this way, this article contributes to our understanding of neoliberal feminist discourses around gender, mothers, and labor precarity. To contextualize these findings, it is first necessary to examine how women's magazines have historically patterned feminist discourse and cultural understandings of work.

Literature review

Magazines have played an important role in shaping women's identities and provided lively alternative spaces for women to connect and exchange political ideas (Suzy D'Enbeau 2009). This is due in part to the unique "multivocality" of the magazine format, which invites readers to comment on articles and collects data from them, such as through surveys (Bailey 2003, 5). Recognizing this crucial social function, during the 1960s–1970s, second-wave feminists were vocal in their criticism of magazine portrayals of women. In *The Feminine Mystique* (Betty Friedan 1963), Betty Friedan gave a withering assessment, arguing that magazines reinforce problematic notions of beauty and women's labor in the home. In 1970, a feminist collective staged a sit-in at the magazine *Ladies Home Journal* to advocate for workers' rights, demanding that the magazine employ more women in leadership roles and add daycare facilities for employees (Grace Lichtenstein 1970). These confrontations revealed the high stakes at the intersection of magazine representation and work. In contrast to publications such as *Ms*., which addressed a broad range of feminist concerns, *Working Mother* focused on caregiving labor, positioning the magazine as a particularly valuable site for identifying neoliberal feminist shifts in cultural understandings of motherhood and work.

These evolutions in magazine discourse also mirror broader ideological currents in media culture, particularly the rise of postfeminism. Indeed, the conceptualization of neoliberal feminism was shaped by media studies scholarship on postfeminism, a sensibility that treats feminism as already achieved and encourages women to navigate remaining inequalities themselves (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2020; Gill 2007). Postfeminist discourses in women's magazines have been well mapped, with research examining previously mentioned feminist publications like *Ms*., but also general interest magazines including *Cosmopolitan* (Kauppinen 2013); *Glamour* (Gill 2009); *Marie Claire* (Gill and Orgad 2018); *McCall's* (Zuckerman 1998); and *Vogue* (Lebovic 2019). In short, neoliberal feminism and postfeminism work together to encourage women to overcome gendered workforce barriers by cultivating affective capacities such as "confidence, resilience, and positive mental attitude" (Gill 2017, 606; Gill and Orgad 2018). Under this logic, feminist empowerment becomes a personal endeavor.

Specific to this project, scholarship on "mumpreneurs" and hustle culture maps how neoliberal feminism and postfeminism mold cultural discourses around mothers and employment insecurity (Littler 2017, 15). The "mumpreneur" archetype draws on a gendered, neoliberal frame that celebrates risk in the gig economy as a mechanism for personal growth and feminist empowerment (Virginia D'Antonio 2019; Patricia Lewis 2010; Littler 2017, 15; Robyn Mayes, Penelope Williams and Paula McDonald 2020; Shani Orgad 2021; Pearce 2023; Mary V. Wrenn and William Waller 2021). Scholars have also noted how entrepreneurial mothering is framed as a pathway to "better" caregiving, a narrative embedded in neoliberal logics (Joanne Duberley and Marylyn Carrigan 2013; Kristina Göransson 2016). More broadly, popular depictions link gig work to hustle culture, which celebrates constant hard work and portrays entrepreneurship as an inspiring path for women to pursue their dreams (Allen and Finn 2024; Francesca Bellini and Vera Lomazzi 2024; Brooke Erin Duffy 2017; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017; McMillan Cottom 2020). While these studies examine current ideologies surrounding the mother-turned-

entrepreneur, none trace the historical evolution of these ideologies in women's magazines, the focus of this study.

There is growing interest in women's motivations for entering the gig economy and how gender impacts their experience, particularly in platform-based work (Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017; Hyperwallet 2017; James 2022; Julia Ticona and Alexandra Mateescu 2018). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that gig work is influenced by gendered expectations, as evidenced by the types of tasks women are more likely to perform and the emphasis on "flexibility" as a key factor guiding their participation (Anderson et al. 2021; Brendan Churchill and Lyn Craig 2019, 751; James 2022; Vili Lehdonvirta 2018; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed how structural gaps in social support and childcare pushed many workers toward gig, freelance, and other precarious forms of work (Anderson et al. 2021; Alexandrea J. Ravenelle, Ken Cai Kowalski and Erica Janko 2021). In fact, many workers enter the gig economy due to care responsibilities (Suri and Gray 2016). However, in contrast to this project, much of this scholarship examines caregivers broadly, rather than focusing specifically on mothers' experiences.

Though previous research on "mumpreneurs" and gender differences in the gig economy has expanded our understanding of why women and mothers enter gig work, there has been little historical analysis of how popular media discourses have naturalized and legitimized this work. One exception is a study charting how discourses around gig work evolved in Australian newspapers, finding such work is presented as a technological inevitability rather than the result of social, economic, or political transformations (Luci Pangrazio, Cameron Bishop and Fiona Lee 2023). Another relevant study analyzed the Israeli women's magazine *L'Aisha* for its framing of work during the second-wave feminist movement (Lachover 2021). Yet, there has been scant historical analysis into the role popular media played in legitimizing contingent labor to women and mothers and how those discourses evolved. To chart these ideological shifts over time, this study analyzes *Working Mother*, a unique publication dedicated exclusively to the experiences of working mothers.

Materials

Feminist media scholars have explored how magazines helped raise the visibility of feminism during the second-wave movement, citing examples like *Ms*. magazine (Farrell 1998). Yet *Working Mother*[1]—launched in 1978 by Carol Evans—was the only major U.S.-based national magazine specifically targeting working mothers. Publisher McCall's touted *Working Mother* as a magazine offering mothers the "practical advice they need in juggling their busy lives" (McCall's Working Mother 1979, 147) and it targeted 16 million working U.S. women holding a readership of 500,000 (N. R. Kleinfield 1980). Notably, the publisher's flagship magazine, *McCall's*, was one of the most feminist-leaning American general-interest magazines, featuring a regular column authored by Gloria Steinem (Zuckerman 1998).

Published every quarter, *Working Mother* magazine contained lifestyle tips and parenting advice, and in its early days played a role in collecting survey research on issues of women's equality in the workplace, including sexual harassment and working mothers' views on abortion. In operation between 1978–2021, the magazine changed ownership

several times, with owners including McCall's (1979); Time Inc./Lang Communications (1986); MacDonald Communications (1996); and Bonnier Corp (2008).

In later years, *Working Mother* billed itself as a hub of information for "career-focused and entrepreneur moms," while continuing to "mentor and advocate" for gender equality in the workplace (Working Mother 2020). According to a 2021 *Working Mother* internal study, readers had a median household income of $100,000, 80% held college degrees, and 70% identified as white (Working Mother 2021). Thus, towards the end of its run, the magazine targeted highly educated, middle- and upper-class white mothers. In addition to the print edition, *Working Mother* had a significant online presence, including a website (WorkingMother.com) and social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube). At this time, it was most known for its "Best of" industry lists, which featured profiles on companies deemed friendly to working mothers.

In 2021, Working Mother Media was sold to research firm EAB (Education Advisory Board), and *Working Mother* ceased publication. Today, Working Mother Media exists as "Seramount," an advocacy organization consulting with businesses on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Founded in the height of the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s and continuing into the COVID-19 era, *Working Mother* serves as an essential repository of popular discourses on motherhood and work and provides insights into how those discourses have transformed over time.

Methods

This study focuses on a comparative analysis of early and later issues of *Working Mother*. Previous studies on *Working Mother* have not focused on issues of work, looking instead at how motherly love is conceptualized (Jillian Duquaine-Watson 2003) and the role of advertisements in shaping discourses around motherhood (Heather Dillaway, Jennifer Haskin and Victoria Velding 2015). Thus, this study focuses on the same artifact but approaches it through a new lens.

To provide background on the methodology, this study investigates all articles published in *Working Mother* magazine between 1978–1982, and then 2007–2021, with textual references related to flexible, precarious, gig or part-time work. The earlier issues were not digitized, so these articles were selected and analyzed by examining the entire issue of each magazine. In contrast, articles from later issues were located via search terms. More specifically, tags searched for later issues of the magazine included: (1) gig; (2) extra income; (3) additional income; (4) flexible job; (5) flexible work; (6) flexwork; (7) freelance; (8) part-time or part time; (9) side-hustle or side hustle; (10) independent contractor; (11) Uber; (12) direct sales; (13) multilevel marketing; and (14) sharing economy.

This search yielded 289 articles, with 60 in the early period and 229 in the later period. These periods were selected for a few reasons. Firstly, research on the postfeminist shift argues the social and economic policies of Reaganism and Thatcherism mark a discursive turn in how precarious work is portrayed in popular media and the 1970s were a key moment of transformation (Orgad 2021). The latter period (2007–2021) was longer because it coincided with the reformation of the precarious economy enabled by digital technology and platform-based tools, such as the rising dominance of companies like Uber and Instacart. Furthermore,

2007–2021 provides insight into two economic epochs reshaping working relations for American families: the Great Recession of 2008 and the COVID-19 crisis. Both crises altered women's employment patterns, caregiving responsibilities, and economic precarity, making them critical periods for examining how women's magazines framed work and family life (Matthias Doepke 2023). Together, these periods capture approximately 20 years of *Working Mother* coverage, roughly half the magazine's lifespan.

The *Working Mother* articles were open and closed coded through nVivo software for themes related to the literature, such as issues around gender and gig work, framing of gig work, areas of labor exploitation and themes related to feminism. The sample was analyzed using critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis investigates the role "bodies of texts" play in constructing our social world and how those meanings change over time (Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy 2002, 5). Critical discourse analysis is a subset of this methodology that examines how discourses can further inequalities (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 25). The critical discourse analysis methodology was selected for its ability to analyze issues of gender, power, and the evolution of representations of working mothers.

Results

A comparative analysis of *Working Mother* reveals significant changes in how unstable labor was covered. Most broadly, the coverage became more positive and increasingly legitimized gig work. Aligned with previous research, flexibility or "flex" is heralded as a key benefit of gig work (Anderson et al. 2021; Lehdonvirta 2018; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Though there is some mention of companies like Uber, which have been much discussed in the previous literature on platform-based work, *Working Mother* primarily encourages mothers to pursue highly gendered work in fields like multilevel marketing (MLM), which have received less attention.

Aligned with the values of neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg 2019), there is a notable shift away from proposing shared solutions to structural problems (like unionizing) towards presenting corporations and specific CEOs as the best advocates for social change. In a related way, mothers are encouraged to view risky work (including unpaid internships) as "aspirational labor" needed to achieve their career dreams (Duffy 2017, 4). Mothers struggling to enter their desired fields post-gig work are advised to develop postfeminist affective sensibilities like a positive attitude (Gill 2017).

Finally, the figure of the "mumpreneur" appears throughout all *Working Mother* coverage. Although early issues are aligned with second-wave feminist values, such as encouraging women to unionize and compete in male-dominated sectors, later issues show a discursive shift towards neoliberal feminism and postfeminism. To elaborate, later coverage recommends that mothers pursue entrepreneurial activities that align with traditional femininity, domesticity, and their identities as mothers. Moreover, this coverage frames the gig economy—with its promise of flexibility—as an alternative for struggling American mothers in the absence of social programs like paid family leave. More generally, later issues of *Working Mother* engage with the discourse of hustle culture while appropriating feminist rhetoric.

Definitions and overall framing of precarious work

Findings from the discourse analysis revealed alterations in definitions of work, both in the specific terminology and in the overall framing. Notably, the language around gig work becomes more positive in the mid-2010s, increasingly legitimizing gig work, with neoliberal feminist and postfeminist themes emerging as dominant. Though commonly addressed in early coverage in the 1970s, wage gaps or gender-based discrimination are not a feature of *Working Mother* coverage in the 2000s. There is also a drift towards highlighting casualized working arrangements, such as "side-hustles"—flexible supplemental work beyond main employment—within exploitative fields like multilevel marketing.

To expand on the above, the language used to describe informalized labor moved from specific to general. Key definitions of non-traditional forms of work are first discussed in the September 1979 issue of *Working Mother*, where part-time work is defined as 16–35 hours per week, differentiated from flextime, which "allows [the] employee some flexibility in her work schedule" (Andrea Burtman 1979, 14). Later, in the 2010s, the term "gig," "side-hustle," or more common catch-all terms like "flex" or "flexwork" describe almost all part-time and/or precarious work, and such work is framed as empowering (Sara Eckel 2010, 49–50). This shift towards a more general terminology like "flexwork" and emphasizing flexibility highlights the positive elements of casual working arrangements and erases meaningful distinctions between different types of work. In a similar way, the language of "hustle" or "side-hustle" has positive connotations that suggest entrepreneurial capacities and a capitalist work ethic (Allen and Finn 2024). For example, articles celebrated women who added late-night "side-hustles" to their full-time jobs, positioning their exhaustion as evidence of a can-do spirit.

Regarding the general representation of contingent labor, earlier issues of *Working Mother* take a mixed view. For instance, an article insists gig workers are at the "bottom of the labor pile; poorly paid, eligible for few benefits" (Linda Small 1979, 93). But as *Working Mother* coverage of gig work increases, mothers are steered towards gendered work in highly vulnerable sectors. For instance, in the mid-2010s, *Working Mother* established a recurring column "Side-Hustle" that focuses on risky, gendered part-time work, most often in multilevel marketing (MLM). As an illustration, *Working Mother* featured profiles on multilevel moms in industries ranging from kitchenware company Pampered Chef to beauty consulting for Rodan + Fields. These patterns in *Working Mother* mirror broader shifts identified across the magazine's editorial ethos.

From collective action to corporate feminism

Previous feminist media scholars have mapped the growing dominance of neoliberal feminist and postfeminist discourses in magazines, demonstrating that coverage moved away from collective actions towards individualized solutions and corporate feminism (Bailey 2003; Farrell 1998; Jenkins and Katherine Johnson 2017). These same trends are also visible in *Working Mother* coverage. For instance, whereas coverage in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that mothers in atypical work advocate for change to achieve parity with men in the workplace, later coverage focuses on individual and pro-capitalist solutions to social problems like pregnancy discrimination.

In the 1970s and 1980s, coverage in *Working Mother* advised mothers to support laws and legislation promoting gender equality. Updates on union organizing activities were commonly included in the "Bulletin Board" column, which appeared after the table of contents. Here, readers were informed "more women than ever are joining unions" (McCall's Working Mother 1979, 93). Other articles focus on the critical role unions play in bringing attention to gendered wage disparities and exploitative work. The article "A New Profession in Flux" provides a strong illustration of the positive view of unions, explaining that unionizing nurses are "transforming once docile nurses' associations into strong advocates" (Nancy Seifer 1980, 118). In a related way, early issues provide useful information on legislation that improves working rights, such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and paid family leave. *Working Mother* even took a direct advocacy role, championing for the U.S. Congress to designate a special "Working Mother's Day" to celebrate working mothers, which was later passed.

By contrast, in the 2000s–2020s, issues align with neoliberal and pro-corporate feminism, emphasizing that individual workers, specific CEOs, or charitable corporations—rather than unions—can advocate for better worker policies. These discourses often appear in a new recurring "Best List" column introduced in the early 2000s, in which individual companies are ranked for their perceived friendliness to working mothers. Accordingly, corporations are depicted as advocating for gender equality and better working conditions. For example, companies appearing in the "Best List" are described as "revolutionaries" (Katherine Reynolds Lewis 2015, 52), "vanguards" (Lewis 2013, 53), and "champions" (Working Mother 2014, 44) for women in the labor force. The prominence of "Best Companies" lists and profiles of their CEOs reinforces a problematic neoliberal framing in which individuals in the professional world—specific employers, particular bosses, corporate CEOs—are seen as the source of power to improve women's standing, rather than organizing through unions or lobbying. It is worth noting that although unions are discussed as a resource for workers in 60% of the issues in the early period, in the later period, they are discussed only once. This omission speaks volumes. This decline in coverage reflects a broader ideological shift away from group advocacy to narratives that emphasize individual agency and entrepreneurialism.

Conceptualizing mumpreneurs and gender

Numerous profiles in *Working Mother* praise mothers in the gig sector as plucky, self-reliant women who are following their passion and improving their mothering. Although early and later issues of *Working Mother* both highlight opportunities in entrepreneurial sectors, later coverage heavily embraces neoliberal feminist and postfeminist discourses and encourages risk-taking. To elaborate, early articles stress that entrepreneurs must rely on personal wealth or loans from family and friends, and mothers are encouraged to forge opportunities in male-dominated industries. In contrast, later coverage downplays the risks and the resources necessary to establish a business. However, most interestingly, later coverage does not encourage women to compete for jobs with men and instead promotes highly gendered working arrangements that will align well with traditional femininity, domesticity and "improve" mothering. Gig work is also framed as a stepping

stone to better work opportunities and as a means of social support and feminist empowerment.

Gender, entrepreneurship, and motherhood: navigating risk and reward

To expand on the above, coverage in the 1970s and early 1980s highlights the risks and rewards of entrepreneurship and urges mothers to compete directly with men for jobs in sectors like industrial sales. As a good example, "Where the Money Is" details the "burgeoning opportunities for women in fields where salesmen have always made an excellent living" (Nancy Baker 1980, 75). The article provides an overview of opportunities across retail, trade, and industrial sales, highlighting independent contracting. In this way, mothers are encouraged to embrace entrepreneurialism not only to earn income, but also, drawing on second-wave feminist ideals, to compete directly with men across sectors. Yet, early issues of *Working Mother* offer ample caution for a mother-turned-entrepreneur, noting that most small business owners rely on personal income or family funds to establish their businesses (Sandra Winston 1979, 47). In other words, this coverage highlights potential obstacles and the resources needed.

In coverage in the 2000s, *Working Mother* readers are encouraged to enter highly gendered, tenuous work that aligns with motherhood. For example, the magazine featured profiles of mothers establishing businesses in a second-hand children's clothing franchise, a child-friendly hair salon, and an environmentally and family-conscious home construction business. As another example, "Hobby Shop" focuses on a mother who realized her ceramics hobby could become a business after selling pottery at her child's school fundraiser. In sum, these evolving discourses mark a transition from second-wave feminist ideals (compete with men) to those more associated with postfeminism and mumpreneurism (adopt gendered work that aligns with mothering). This shift away from collective solutions like unionization parallels a broader discursive turn in *Working Mother*, where individual resilience and adopting an entrepreneurial spirit are increasingly emphasized.

Aspirational labor, hustle culture, and gig work as feminist empowerment

In *Working Mother*, gig work is often presented as a stepping stone to more stable, permanent work—a pervasive representational dynamic that Duffy (2017) termed "aspirational labor" (4). To elaborate, mothers struggling to re-enter the labor market after parental leave or staying home to care for children are encouraged to seek freelance, contract work, or even unpaid work like internships as a route back into the professional world. In this rationale, gig work is not a career dead-end, but a helpful detour that leads to more fulfilling, more stable work. But, to achieve their passion and career dreams, women are advised to cultivate postfeminist sensibilities, such as resilience and a positive attitude.

To explain, coverage suggests that barriers to rejoining the workforce after parental/family leave can be overcome through self-work and hustle. For example, in "Welcome Back," mothers attempting to find a full-time job after a foray into part-time or gig work are encouraged not to "dwell on the barriers" but to instead "focus on the pluses" and "build your brand," emphasizing the skills gained through a side-hustle, like selling goods on Etsy (Working Mother 2014, 26). In this way, neoliberal feminist messaging about corporate marketing techniques—i.e., "build your brand"—appears alongside advice on

developing sensibilities like positivity (Working Mother 2014, 26). These highly technical and corporatized self-improvement discourses recur throughout *Working Mother*. To provide some examples, mothers trying to find stable work are advised to "invest in yourself" (Teri Cettina 2015, 55), "relaunch" (Katherine Bowers 2015, 20–25), "tailor your behaviour," and "upgrade your identity" (Michelle Roberts 2008, 59). The message is clear: change yourself, not the conditions that keep you in gig work or out of work. Said another way, the magazine's later focus on cultivating individual sensibilities, such as "positivity," forecloses any discussion of the shared obstacles that mothers face. This individualization of responsibility aligns with broader socioeconomic shifts, including the rise of platform-based gig work, which gained prominence throughout the 2010s–2020s.

Gig work as a site of feminist empowerment and social support

Contemporaneously with the expansion of mobile technology and the rise of platform-based work, between the 2010s–2020s, *Working Mother* coverage of gig work spiked. This expansion is due in part to the introduction of the "Side-Hustle" column previously mentioned and to changing economic conditions. Following the Great Recession of 2008, *Working Mother* significantly increased its coverage of casualized work and presented it as a source of stability in volatile times. Such articles also suggested that the gig economy can serve as a substitute for government benefits like unemployment.

Amongst the most troubling coverage of this period, several articles recommend work in the multilevel marketing industry (MLM) and imply it can stand-in for social support programs like paid family leave. As context, the U.S. does not mandate family or parental leave for employers, highlighting a distinctive gap in support for families. As an illustration of this type of pro-MLM coverage, "Style Star" profiles mother Kasey Murphy, a full-time dental hygienist and part-time associate for the MLM jewelry company Stella & Dot. Below a smiling photograph of Murphy and her family—and a selection of Stella & Dot jewelry—Murphy explains how MLM work has supported her young family:

> I started my Stella & Dot side business four years ago when I was 12 weeks pregnant with my second child, Kendall. My goal was to fully fund a three-month-long maternity leave while still being near my then-3-year-old son, Kellan . . . fell in love with the brand's flexible earning opportunity . . . My son might be working beside me, and he'll see the Stella & Dot logo and say: "Mom, it's your business! I'm going to be the boss of my own construction site." (Maricar Santos 2017, 11)

While one could argue that MLM firms capitalize on the vulnerable conditions facing expectant and new mothers, Murphy argues that the "flexible" income she earns can fund her parental leave (Santos 2017, 11). This is especially concerning given that scholars like Virginia D'Antonio (2019) reveal that MLM workers receive "minimal financial gain" from their labor (1), and other research suggests up to 75% reap negative earnings (Marguerite DeLiema, Stacie Bosley and Doug Shadel 2021, 109). In effect, articles like the one discussed above not only promote risky work but also legitimize some of the most exploitative forms of labor. Further, the MLM mother, Kasey Murphy, insists gig work improves her mothering by modeling pro-capitalist, pro-corporate values.

Working Mother's coverage of MLMs frequently also leverages themes of empowerment using terms like "freedom" and "independence" to discuss MLM work (Michelle Roberts 2009, 50–51). So, not only do these shifts mirror neoliberal discourse and a move away from mutual solutions to social problems (like lack of paid family leave), but gig work is described as freeing and a mechanism to correct gendered workforce imbalances. In other words, such articles frequently invoke feminist rhetoric—drawing on themes of justice and freedom—to frame precarious work in a positive light, diverting attention from political or policy-based discussions. Over time, this positioning reinforces traditional gender roles and patriarchal ideals, even as it adopts feminist language of solidarity and equality.

Discussion and conclusion

Spanning nearly 50 years, *Working Mother* offers a media snapshot of shifting discourses surrounding mothers, precarious work, and feminist empowerment. In its early days, the feminist-leaning magazine served as an essential resource and cultural gathering place. For instance, it collected survey data on issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace and mothers' views on abortion. Yet, its portrayals of work changed over time. Whereas early language used to describe gig or informalized work was quite precise, later coverage adopted catch-all terms like "flex" or "side-hustle," redirecting attention toward the seemingly positive aspects of such work. Read cumulatively, the findings reveal how neoliberal feminist logics reconfigured contingent work as emotionally fulfilling and morally valuable, obscuring the structural forces shaping mothers' labor.

Questions of how struggling working mothers should advocate for themselves also illuminate a neoliberal and postfeminist shift. In the 1970s, *Working Mother* frequently highlighted collective sources of power, including unions and legislative protections for contingent workers in the U.S. By contrast, later articles, drawing on neoliberal feminist paradigms, increasingly suggested that specific corporations were revolutionary forces fighting for social change. Yet, there is extensive evidence that American corporate interests have repeatedly lobbied against policies such as paid family leave. This contradiction underscores how pro-corporate empowerment discourse can obscure the structural forces that undermine societal support for working mothers.

"Mumpreneur" coverage follows a similar trajectory. Although entrepreneurship appears across all periods, early Working Mother articles emphasized its risks and the resources—such as loans or personal wealth—required to succeed. These articles encouraged women to compete directly in male-dominated fields, such as industrial sales, consistent with second-wave feminist values. In the late 2000s–2020s, however, mothers were steered toward highly gendered entrepreneurial fields (such as MLM kitchenware sales) that aligned closely with domesticity. In a related way, precarious gig work—including unpaid internships—was increasingly portrayed as a path to personal fulfilment (Duffy 2017). Mothers unable to find employment were also advised to adopt postfeminist sensibilities such as a positive attitude and a willingness to hustle, further shifting conversations away from shared gendered barriers toward individualized solutions. Yet, most concerning, *Working Mother* coverage implied that the gig economy—or MLM "side-hustles" in particular—could "fund"

parental leave (Maricar Santos 2017, 11). This framing suggests that gig work could fill significant gaps in the U.S. social safety net. In brief, articles drew on feminist themes such as equality or girl power to promote precarious work, even as the coverage upheld patriarchal gender roles and traditional femininity.

Taken together, the twin discourses of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism in *Working Mother* shifted cultural conversations about unstable employment away from collective solutions toward individual ones. Again, this shift overlooked reforms that could help level the economic playing field. Indeed, lack of access to social support programs pushes many U.S. mothers into informalized working arrangements in the first place (Anderson et al. 2021; Hyperwallet 2017; James 2022). Still, some later issues of *Working Mother* included critical reporting. Articles provided practical information about protections in the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and pregnancy-related accommodations required through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Others emphasized that the U.S. is the only "developed country" without national paid family leave (Barbara Frankel 2019, 64–68). One article explicitly critiqued side-hustles, arguing that they contribute to the gender pay gap. Yet this type of critical coverage represented only 13% of the latter sample, suggesting that these viewpoints were overshadowed by more dominant neoliberal and postfeminist discourses on gig work.

In 2021, *Working Mother* ceased as a national magazine. The timing of its death during the COVID-19 pandemic is perhaps rather poignant, as research suggests that labor disruptions stemming from COVID-19 will have long-term consequences for gender parity, especially for mothers (Patricia Cohen and Tiffany Hsu 2020). Along these lines, in its final issue, *Working Mother* columnist Stephanie Emma Pfeffer (2020) explored how the crisis exposed deep structural "faults" within the U.S. social safety net (94–98). This critical tone stood in contrast to much of the coverage examined for this study. So, while some might argue that new business models made the magazine obsolete, as has been the case with so many magazines in the digital era, its embrace of neoliberal feminism, postfeminism, and even "white feminism"—a feminist framework that overlooks race and class difference—may have rendered it less relevant to readers (Rafia Zakaria 2021). Put differently, *Working Mother* failed to evolve its definition of the American "working mother," promoting a corporate-approved feminism (for its white, middle-class audience) that became increasingly detached from policy, politics, and material inequalities.

Although this study focused on 20 years of coverage, examining the magazine's entire publication history and its multiple changes in ownership might also reveal more nuanced insights. Future research should also discuss how these discourses operate for a more diverse group of mothers and, further, engage directly with mothers to better understand their motivations for entering gig work. Doing so would also provide deeper insight into how media discourses intersect with mothers' lived experiences and decision-making processes. Yet, most broadly, this analysis demonstrates how media discourses help normalize precarious labor for mothers, legitimizing market-based "solutions" to gendered workforce problems in place of collective or policy-based reforms.

Note

1. Note: During the period of McCall's ownership, the title of the magazine was *McCall's Working Mother*.

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Notes on contributor

Jessica Crowell is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Digital Media and Journalism at SUNY New Paltz. Jessica is a Ph.D.-trained qualitative researcher working at the intersection of sustainability, feminism, the gig economy, and digital inequalities. Her work has appeared in book chapters and academic journals. Jessica is a firm believer in engaged scholarship and has authored reports on economic opportunity and information access for global NGOs and governments.

ORCID

Jessica K. Crowell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9614-2710

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