



(Re)Imagining Motherhood Among Young Women: Between Neoliberal Subjection and Feminist Emancipation in a Familistic Context

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Abstract

This article examines how neoliberal subjectivity has been established in young women who are activists in feminist spaces and social reproduction struggles in Barcelona. Based on interviews with 19 white, cisgender, non-mother women—highly educated but living in precarious conditions—who actively participate in these movements, the study explores how neoliberal logic shapes their perceptions of motherhood. Neoliberal subjectivity, understood as a cost-benefit calculation prioritizing self-optimization, pressures women to balance motherhood and careers as individual responsibilities without state support. This logic often influences middle- or upper-class women aligned with neoliberal feminism. However, our findings reveal that participants frequently reject traditional maternity or consider remaining childless rather than adopting the neoliberal multifaceted woman model. Three factors limit neoliberal subjectivity's influence: precarious living conditions in a familistic culture raise doubts about meeting socially accepted reproductive standards; feminist ideology no longer views motherhood as essential, enabling resistance to conservative, family-centered state norms; and the everyday forms of resistance that challenge dominant neoliberal and patriarchal norms. This study adds to Foucauldian perspectives by integrating materialist feminist insights and contributes to understanding Spain's low fertility rates. The findings imply rethinking therapeutic approaches, structural policies, feminist discourses, and methodologies for understanding contemporary reproductive decisions shaped by socioeconomic conditions rather than individual preferences alone.

Keywords Neoliberalism · Subjectivity · Mothering · Motherhood · Feminism · Spain · Precarity · Socioeconomic

In the last decades, family dynamics and the ways in which maternity is attained and conceived of in Western countries have experienced deep transformations. Among these changes, the mass incorporation of women into the labour market, their broad access to higher education, and other social processes such as the de-standardization and individualization of life trajectories stand out. All these factors have significantly altered the traditional ways of forming a family. In this context, the neoliberal project has come to intensify the existing crisis of social reproduction, since the logic of capital prioritises low-cost accumulation with little regard for the building of a robust public infrastructure for

care (Fraser, 2023). This de-publicization has led, as social reproduction theorists argue, to several phenomena: the commodification of care for those who can afford it; the relegation of care responsibilities to families and communities for those who cannot; and the financialization of the social reproduction of life (Adkins, 2019; Fraser, 2023).

Yet neoliberalism, according to the Foucauldian tradition, has not been only an economic project, but has called for a new rationality and the creation of a new subjectivity marked by a logic of cost-benefit calculation (Alemán, 2021; Brown, 2015; Foucault, 2010; Laval & Dardot, 2015). This new logic has established itself in women's lives and has subordinated them to such cost-benefit analysis in different spheres of life—family, work, and motherhood—if they wish to be complete, multifaceted individuals (McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Rottenberg, 2013, 2017). Even though this logic has mainly affected middle or higher-class women with higher education, it has also become the hegemonic

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cultural framework, with a bearing on the prevailing ideal of motherhood. However, this neoliberal subjection is also met with everyday forms of resistance, which often take the shape of partial and ambivalent negotiations with dominant norms rather than explicit rejections (Foucault, 1976/1978, 1982).

This paper aims to understand how, in the Spanish state, the desire and the notion of motherhood are being re-constructed by young women in a neoliberal context. We focus our attention on those women belonging to the “fatigued generation” (Espluga, 2021): highly educated women facing precarious life standards in a large city like Barcelona and who identify themselves as feminists. The guiding questions for this study concern whether neoliberal subjectivity has permeated the ways in which young feminists think and act, and how this, in turn, influences their desire to become mothers and shapes their potential future maternity practices. These practices encompass how they reconcile motherhood with their life projects; how and with whom they choose to raise and care for their children; and how their sex-affective bonds and support networks inform their desires and their expectations.

In analyzing these experiences, we understand that they are not only shaped by inherited imaginaries and representations of motherhood, but also by the structural constraints characteristic of neoliberal societies—marked by a structural crisis of social reproduction, in which the capacity to sustain life is increasingly subordinated to logics of capital accumulation and the re-domestication of care (Fraser, 2023; Vogel, 1983). Furthermore, we explore whether the participants’ identification with the feminist movement and their involvement in struggles for social reproduction serve as a form of resistance against neoliberal forms of subjection. Thus, our goal here is to understand their subjectivity and, therefore, gain an insight into how they integrate behaviours, mandates, perceptions of reality, and ethical and moral constructions which are determined by power dispositions that pollute them but are not always perceptible (Alemán, 2021).

Our analysis considers the fact that these young women have grown up in a familistic cultural environment and are experiencing serious professional precariousness within a context of a crisis of the social reproduction of life. In the Spanish state, the late exit from Franco’s dictatorship and the quick imposition of the neoliberal project right afterwards led to an absence of a protective public infrastructure, a lack of provisions for family policies, and the gradual entrance of women into the labour market as cheap, flexible, precarious, non-unionized labour. Thus, although the consolidation of democracy and the economic development which characterized the 1980s contributed to the rise of new educational, professional and familial trajectories for women, it is also

true that the traditional idea of the role of women as that of main caregivers in the home has been perpetuated. With the present study, we contribute to the understanding of how the economic and cultural contexts, as well as the political struggles of feminism for social reproduction, have managed to influence the ways in which—and the strength with which—the neoliberal subjection has established itself in the minds of women.

Thus, we interviewed 19 white, cisgender, childless women from different social strata but all of them with higher education. They all identify themselves as feminists and are part of 14 collectives that are not only composed of dissident women and identities fighting exclusively (or mainly) for feminist emancipation but are groups that struggle for the social reproduction of life. By struggles for social reproduction, we refer to collective action that articulates demands, mobilizations and new ontologies of social practice in relation to those “non-market” spheres, but which allow the reproduction of our life (Fraser, 2023; Varela, 2023). These are struggles led by women and by dissident subjects who are often racialized (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Gutiérrez Cueli & García Navarro, 2023) including the fight for decent housing, for the strengthening of communities, for the public provision of services such as healthcare and education, for the recognition of care work and feminist emancipation, and for the defence of land and territory.

Barcelona and its metropolitan area stand out for the presence of feminist collectives and struggles for the social reproduction of life. In fact, it serves as a laboratory of feminisms in plural, hosting numerous events by both grassroots movements and institutional actors, well-coordinated with Catalan activists. The territory hosts a diverse range of feminist movements: anti-capitalist feminist assemblies; anticolonialist groups like *Periferia Cimarronas* (Maroon Outskirts); LGBTQ+ and transfeminist collectives such as *Crida LGTB* (LGBTQ+ Call); and more heterogeneous, even institutional, organizations like *Ca la Dona* (Woman’s Home), illustrating the variety of feminisms present in the area.

The Neoliberal Subjection

The point of departure of this paper is a Foucauldian vision according to which neoliberalism is not only an economic or ideological project, but a new way of governing, a new rationality which involves a specific way of structuring, organizing, and directing people (Foucault, 2010; Laval, 2020; Laval & Dardot, 2015). In this sense, neoliberal power operates not through oppression or ideological control, but by producing a competitive market milieu that

forces individuals to adapt by calculating costs and benefits in business-like fashion when facing incentives and disincentives (Foucault, 2010; Laval, 2020). Thus, neoliberal government establishes new subjective orientations, behavioral frameworks, and mental-physical frames that produce normalized ways of thinking and behaving while maintaining individuals' sense of freedom (Alemán, 2021).

In this context, individuals appear free to act according to their preferences and maximize performance yet must capitalize on their own resources and assume all risks. Neoliberalism compels individuals to manage their lives and relationships like businesses, following logics of high performance, self-investment, and self-valuation to become "owners or managers of themselves" (Alemán, 2021; Brown, 2015; Laval & Dardot, 2015). This subjection fosters an optimistic disposition based on happiness and self-confidence (Binkley, 2011; Scharff, 2016), where happiness becomes an imperative (Ahmed, 2010).

Thus, neoliberalism attempts to eclipse the mortal, sexed, and speaking subject in favor of supposedly happy human capital that is permanently active and motivated (Alemán, 2021). This logic configures a new subject in perpetual "self-maximization," living in cycles of compulsion and repetition that compel individuals to exceed their limitations while constantly feeling inadequate (Alemán, 2016). Thus, subjects strive for more experiences, possibilities, and singularizing differentiation while capital offers products and services responding to supposedly unlimited desires. The neoliberal project's impoverishment of wage-earners and subsidy cuts are apparently compensated through increased personal credits, loans, and insurances (Lazzarato, 2013) that boost the feeling that everything is possible.

The Neoliberal Subjection and Motherhood

Women's lives and maternity are not free from this process of neoliberal subjection that we have just described. In the 1980s, at the same time as the second wave of feminism was taking place, women's right to work and to work-family conciliation services financed by the state held a central place in the prevailing idea of maternity (Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2013; Wall, 2013). In the context of neoliberalism, what we have witnessed is the emergence of a neoliberal strand of feminism which responds to a neoliberal rationality (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017). At the turn of the century, neoliberal feminism reintroduced the normative expectation according to which women must have children. In the face of a commodification of life that makes it difficult to reconcile family and work time, maternity mutated into a project of self-sufficiency and happiness that no longer requires the claiming of state-provided services and benefits

(McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2022), which agrees with the atomizing and self-accountability trends of the neoliberal project (McRobbie, 2013; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015; Rottenberg, 2013, 2017).

Feminist studies of communication and popular culture carried out in the Anglo-Saxon world (McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Rottenberg, 2013, 2017) showed to us that, for the ideal of maternity as individual responsibility to prevail, it has been necessary to create a lexicon centred on positive emotions (balance, happiness, initiative, and capacity for self-improvement). This lexicon has contributed to ensure that the desire of women is to achieve the perfect balance between their professional project and a happy and cheerful family life (McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Rottenberg, 2013, 2017), as it has also contributed to make women willing to follow a pattern of consumption and aesthetic perfection (McRobbie, 2013). In connection with this, we find references to a "yummy mummy," who is a lovely mother because she is simultaneously devoted to her children, to the enjoyment of her profession, and to complying with beauty and consumption standards (Allen & Osgood, 2009; Jermyn, 2008; Littler, 2013; Malatzky, 2017; McRobbie, 2013). We also see references to an "enterprising mother" who develops business ideas while she looks after her children and family (Littler, 2013). Both images manage to project the image of an empowered woman who is, nevertheless, reassuringly "feminine," and who holds home life in high esteem.

To achieve the balance promised to the multifaceted woman, women are transformed into generic human capital (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017). This transformation involves prioritizing cost-benefit calculations to secure financial solvency and balance an aspirational career, family, beauty, and consumption. In this context, young women are constructed as the ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill, 2008; Rutherford, 2018) who must make good future calculations. It is they who must become entrepreneurs of their own "biographies of choice" (Baker, 2008; Rutherford, 2018). They are expected to surpass themselves, passionately embrace consumerist lifestyles and renewed looks, and make the most of their time to thrive professionally (McRobbie, 2007; Rutherford, 2018). Moreover, they are expected to promote their own sexual and reproductive autonomy (McRobbie, 2007). In this vein, they are encouraged to freeze their eggs to postpone motherhood and achieve the desired work-life balance in the future (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017).

It is within this neoliberal context as well that, beginning as early as the 1990s, the expectation of intensive motherhood becomes firmly established (Hays, 1996; Osborne, 1993), reinforcing and amplifying the ideal of the domestic goddess (Anderson & Moore, 2014; O'Brien, 2014; Vandenbeld Giles, 2014). This maternal model posits motherhood as a primary source of personal fulfilment and mothers

are expected to be constantly available, and have the ability of listening to their children, talk to them, and give them their complete affection (Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 2008; Lipovetsky, 2020; Liss et al., 2013). The model of intensive motherhood promises to turn today's young "sacred" children into skillful, cognitively stimulated, autonomous, unique, free, and happy future subjects (Hays, 1996; Lipovetsky, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022). This model functions as a device to distinguish between "good" and "bad" mothers (Hays, 1996; Malacrida & Boulton, 2012), while the capacity to perform this idealised form of mothering is largely contingent on social class, race, and employment conditions (Acker, 2006; Arteaga Aguirre et al., 2020; Elliott et al., 2015; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Medina Bravo et al., 2014; Randles, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2022).

This model of intensive motherhood might appear to be incompatible with the ideal of the multifaceted woman that comes together with women's neoliberal subjection. However, these two ideals coexist as hegemonic narratives within neoliberalism and are tied to conservative ideologies (Girerd et al., 2023). A rhetoric that centres "the good of the child" (Ruddick, 2007), promotes domestic self-sufficiency (Schreiber, 2014), and encourages women to invest time, energy, money and love in their children within a family-based framework facilitates a reconciliation between modernity and tradition without critically confronting gender inequality in the heterosexual family structure.

The reaffirmation of intensive maternal dedication characteristic of conservative visions of motherhood paradoxically coexists with neoliberal imperatives urging women to embrace individualism and ambition in the labour market (Verniers et al., 2022). This dual mandate—to be both a devoted mother and a worker—is framed as a matter of personal choice and empowerment (Iborra, 2016; López Varela, 2019). Yet it is a response to the state's withdrawal from care provision and the delegation of social reproduction to women and the domestic sphere. As social reproduction theorists point out, neoliberalism intensifies the care crisis by shifting reproductive responsibility away from the state and onto families and, within them, onto women (Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2016, 2023). Thus, the structural conditions that render this dual expectation unfeasible for many women (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014) are systematically obscured, while, at the same time, the labour of women of colour, migrants, and working-class women is ignored (Fraser, 2023). Domestic work, the donation of their eggs, and/or the use of the wombs of poor women enable the neoliberal subjection of white, middle- and upper-class women (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017).

Within the framework of the Spanish State, neoliberal discourses, combined with neoconservative ones, have

repositioned the figure of the "good mother" at the center of female identity, even in a context of low birth rates (Alzard Cerezo, 2019). This centrality stems from a neoconservative reaction that leverages the neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility to impose a singular and legitimate model of dedicated and intensive motherhood, reinforcing traditional ideals (Iborra, 2016; López Varela, 2019).

In the Spanish context, third-wave feminism also sparked an "uncomfortable debate" about motherhood from the 1990s onwards, creating opposing positions. On one side, there is a current more aligned with equality feminism, which critiques the role of women as caregivers, arguing that it reinforces the neoliberal status quo and reduces the female body to an instrument for satisfying patriarchal desires (Gimeno, 2018). This current opposes the imposition of motherhood and supports policies such as equal family leave (Pazos, 2020). On the other hand, there is a current closely linked to difference feminism, which emphasizes women's distinct moral and cultural experiences, asserting that gender differences are fundamental rather than socially constructed. This current views motherhood as a form of "feminist activism" (Cañero Ruiz, 2022) and advocates reconciling feminism with motherhood (Vivas, 2020), contrasting with equality feminism's focus on sameness. It also emphasizes the importance of biology and difference and rejects the stigma associated with "intensive mothers" and argues that mothering should be valued as work (Cañero Ruiz, 2022). In this way, this latter current contributes to advancing the ideal of intensive motherhood. Both currents, however, share the effort to demystify the ideal of the "good mother" and deconstruct the idea of maternal instinct (Saletti, 2008).

A Familistic Context, But Low Birthrates

The changes in the institution of family that have taken place in the last decades in the Spanish state have been marked by deep social changes and legal reforms, such as the divorce law or the non-heterosexual-couple marriage law (De Lamo Velado, 2021). These changes have weakened the traditional family model prevailing under Franco's military dictatorship (1939–1975) which, in collaboration with the Church, promoted a model of womanhood centered on the traditional family—leaving a lasting influence on Spanish society's perception of motherhood (Salido & Moreno, 2008). This historical legacy is why all family transformations came later and have been in effect for a shorter period than in other European countries, although they took less time to develop (Esping-Andersen, 2013).

Thus, in the Spanish state, in line with the average EU country, we have witnessed a diversification of family

forms, a reduction of the size of homes, the social acceptance of co-habitation, and an increase in the number of children who are born outside marriage (Ayuso, 2019; Castro Martín, 2007), but with less intensity and greater continuance of the traditional family model (Moreno, 2011). In any case, we have seen the emergence of a plurality of household models: two-breadwinner families, single-parent ones, reconstituted households, single-person ones, etc. (Alberdi, 2004; Campillo, 2010; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018; Moreno et al., 2017; Morero Beltrán & Samaranch, 2025). However, this new reality has not meant the end of certain cultural aspects, like the fact that the mother continues to play the role of main child-carer (Alberdi, 2004; Ayuso, 2019; Campillo, 2010; Moreno et al., 2017; Solé & Parella, 2004). The lack of a public family policy with a gender perspective in the Spanish state has continued to sustain an already familistic culture (Campillo, 2010; Flaquer, 2004; Guner et al., 2014; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018; López-Rodríguez & Gutiérrez Palacios, 2023; Moreno et al., 2017; Salido & Moreno 2008; Naldini, 2003). In this culture, the pooling of intrafamilial resources, redistribution across generations, and intergenerational cohabitation have become defining characteristics of Mediterranean states (Campillo, 2010; Flaquer, 2004; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018; Naldini, 2003).

Within this familistic context, the reduction in the number of children per woman and the delay in the age of motherhood have been among the primary strategies women have used to balance work and family life (Alberdi, 2004; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018). In this way, although most women in Spain have at least one child (Esping-Andersen, 2013), fertility has decreased more sharply than in other European countries (Delgado, 2022; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018) and there has also been a significant delay in the age of entering motherhood (Moreno, 2007). The total fertility rate in Spain was 2.77 in 1975, compared to 1.16 in 2022, placing it last among the 27 European Union countries, which had an average fertility rate of 1.46 in 2022. Regarding the age of first-time motherhood, it was 28.85 years in 1975, while by 2023, it had risen to 32.59 years, making Spain one of the EU countries with the oldest first-time mothers (Eurostat, 2024; INE, 2024).

The situation of women in the labor market in Spain also explains the data discussed in the previous paragraph. In contrast with the European trend, in the Spanish state, the mass entrance of women into the labour market has not been as intense as in other European countries (Guner et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2017). Female employment rate in the Spanish state was 27.42% in 1976 and has continuously grown since then, until reaching 65.7% in 2023, a year when it amounted to 70.6% in the European Union (Eurostat, 2024). Even though in the 1980s, in many European

countries, we find a positive correlation between women's participation in labour and birthrates, this has not been the case in the Spanish state (Castro Martín, 2007; Castro Martín & Martín-García, 2016; Moreno, 2011). Prolonged periods of high unemployment, which have often disproportionately affected women; a higher proportion of women working full-time rather than part-time compared to other European economies; the prevalence of an informal economy in which many women participate; and the late entry of women into the labor market as a cheap, flexible workforce with higher rates of temporary contracts and lower unionization (Gálvez Muñoz & Torres López, 2010; Guner et al., 2014; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018) combined with the lack of public family policies with a gender perspective, have contributed to discouraging fertility.

Finally, we must add that job insecurity and structural unemployment among young people, combined with residential insecurity, have placed this age group in a state of economic and existential vulnerability. This situation of economic and residential insecurity has delayed key decisions. In particular, it has postponed leaving the parental home (Delgado, 2022; Gentile, 2014) or defining their life plans regarding family and reproduction (Esteve et al., 2016; Miret, 2019).

Understanding the process of women's neoliberal subjection must be situated within the context described above. In this regard, social reproduction theory helps to explain how, in the Spanish state, the family—and women in particular—continue to play a central role in assuming responsibility for care, as well as in the consumption and financialization of services and resources linked to the social reproduction of life (Adkins, 2019; Arruzza & Bhattacharya, 2020; Federici, 2004; Fraser, 2023; Vogel, 1983), in the context of a retreating state and a precarized labour market. At the same time, this theoretical perspective makes it possible to understand that decisions around motherhood and low fertility rates do not stem from isolated individual choices, but rather from a context in which reproducing one's own life—and potential future life—under conditions of well-being is increasingly difficult.

Method

Participants

We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with childless, cisgender women aged between 20 and 30 ($M=26.11$), identifying as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or without a specific sexual orientation. All participants lived in Barcelona or its metropolitan area and were politically active in feminist groups or in

movements related to social reproduction. We chose activist women because we considered that their political ideology could be a possible limit to the establishment of neoliberal subjection. Participants were part of collectives whose central focus is anti-capitalism (Cortsenques Dissidents [Dissident Women from Les Corts] or Espai Feminista de Sants [Sants Feminist Space]) and who operate within the framework of the Xarxa de Feministes Anticapitalistes dels Països Catalans [Network of Anticapitalist Feminists of the Catalan Territories]. We also include the historical experience of the Moviment Democràtic de les Dones [Women's Democratic Movement], a network rooted in anti-Francoist community struggle and anti-capitalist. Women involved in ecological feminism also participate through the Acció Ecofeminista [Ecofeminist Action] network, as well as in defence of land and international cooperation, such as Cooperació [Cooperation]. Likewise, we include housing collectives (Assemblea Feminista d'Habitatge Raval Rebel [Raval Rebel Feminist Assembly for Housing], Grup d'Habitatge de les Corts [Les Corts Housing Group], Sindicat d'Habitatge de l'Eixample Esquerra [Left Eixample Housing Union]) that organise alongside other groups across the Catalan region.

In addition, we gather experiences of feminist activism in the field of education, such as the gender committees of the Assemblea d'Estudiants de la Universitat de Barcelona [University of Barcelona Student Assembly] or the Grup Escolta de Catalunya [Gender Committee – Catalan Scouts] (non-formal education). Finally, we include collectives working for the democratisation and feminist transformation of community social spaces, from self-managed leisure (Col·lectiu Feminista Ante-Belüm [Ante-Belüm Feminist Group]) to metropolitan territorial feminist organising (Assemblea Feminista de Rubí [Rubí Feminist Assembly], Akelarre l'Hospitalet, Maresme Feminista [Feminist Maresme]).

All participants reported either currently experiencing or having previously experienced situations of precariousness. Their affective relationships varied and included: women with a partner with whom they cohabited; women with a partner but living separately; and women without a partner. These partnerships could be either monogamous or non-monogamous. Participants were selected using purposeful snowball sampling, based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- (1) They had to identify as feminists and be actively involved in feminist organizations or groups focused on social reproduction.
- (2) The selection aimed to represent the geographical diversity of the various organizations.

(3) Participants were between 20 and 30 years old at the time of the interview.

(4) They had to either be currently experiencing or had recently experienced precariousness (in terms of salary, time, or job security).

(5) They could not be mothers at the time of the interview.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through an informational flyer distributed via WhatsApp, Telegram groups, and social media platforms. The flyer specified the required socio-demographic profile and included a registration form link. Eligible applicants were contacted to arrange interviews and received informed consent forms to sign beforehand. Interviews were conducted in-person or online based on participant preference, lasting 60–90 minutes each. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. We employed guided, semi-structured interviews to examine realities in a qualitative, subjective, and context-specific manner, going beyond "objective" data to understand the meaning participants attribute to their behavior (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012). This approach is particularly valuable for uncovering interpretations of actors involved in social phenomena (Flick, 2007).

The final interview script was organised into seven thematic blocks. The first block focused on the desire for motherhood, examining whether participants expressed a clear aspiration to become mothers, rejected the possibility altogether, or experienced uncertainty or ambivalence—alongside the reasons they provided for these positions. The second block delved into how participants envisioned the upbringing, care, and socialisation of potential children, should they wish to have any. The third block addressed participants' life projects and how these intersected with their personal identities, based on how they imagined reconciling motherhood with their lifestyles, goals, and sense of self. The fourth block turned to sex-affective bonds and support networks, considering the influence of partners, friends, and communities on participants' reflections and decisions regarding childrearing. The fifth block examined material conditions, specifically current and anticipated economic and labour-market situations, and how these shaped the possibility of considering motherhood or rejecting the idea of it. The sixth block explored cultural heritage and social imaginaries, inviting participants to reflect on the family models they had been exposed to as well as on the broader cultural representations of motherhood present in their

environments. Finally, the seventh block addressed the role of feminist ideology, understood here as a framework within which participants construct their expectations, meanings, and contradictions surrounding motherhood.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), which enabled us to interpret latent meanings and recognise the active role of the researcher in the interpretive process. The study adopted a critical-realist epistemological framework (Fletcher, 2016; Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021), which distinguishes between narrated experiences, identified patterns, and underlying structural mechanisms. A systematic, step-by-step process combining both deductive and inductive reasoning was employed to capture participant lived experiences and the structural forces shaping their narratives around motherhood, while continuously acknowledging their agency (Biglia & Bonet-Martí, 2009).

First, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and revised for accuracy. Transcripts were read repeatedly to foster immersion in the data. Second, all transcripts were coded using pre-existing theoretical concepts (e.g., neo-liberal subjectivity, feminist ideology) combined with inductive exploration to allow new categories to emerge. Acknowledging that researchers are not neutral observers and our theoretical orientations and lived experiences inevitably influence interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022), we engaged in reflexivity to critically examine how our own standpoints affected the coding process. This reflexivity was embodied in documenting analytical decisions and ongoing examination of how our conceptual frameworks shaped pattern identification, following an abductive logic that fostered constant dialogue between theory and empirical data.

Third, codes with similar meanings were grouped into preliminary themes that were largely descriptive and reflected recurring issues (e.g., "precariousness and uncertainty," "rejection of the good-mother ideal"). These candidate themes were then reviewed against the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness, with some themes combined, divided, or redefined to more accurately represent patterns and contradictions in the data.

Subsequently, final themes were analysed in greater depth, considering both semantic content (what was said) and latent meanings (how and from what positionality ideas were expressed). Each theme was refined to reflect structural and ideological mechanisms underpinning participants' narratives, aligning with critical realism's aim of moving from the empirical to the real level—identifying not only individual resistances and agencies, but also structural conditions that enable or constrain different maternal

experiences. Finally, themes were integrated into a coherent interpretative narrative consistent with our research questions and theoretical framework.

Researcher Positioning and Reflexivity

The authors of this paper are white, cisgender women from the Global North, with connections to academia and diverse forms of feminist activism and struggles for social reproduction in Barcelona. While we share certain privileges, our differing life, work, and political trajectories have shaped our research questions, interpretations, and modes of engagement. The first author is a 28-year-old PhD student in sociology, experiencing job precariousness and housing insecurity. She actively participates in one of the groups represented in this study. She is not a mother and remains undecided about motherhood. The second author is a 45-year-old assistant professor, sociologist, and educationalist. Although she is also not a mother, she has deeply reflected on the reconciliation of motherhood and an academic career from the perspective her own personal experience. She has longstanding connections to social movements in Barcelona, though not to the ones examined in this study. The third author is a 59-year-old chaired professor in gender studies, an economist, and a mother of two teenagers. She enjoys greater job stability. Her research focuses on topics such as mono-motherhood and public care policies. She participates in the feminist movement, but not in any of the groups analysed here.

These diverse positionalities informed our own stances and gave rise to an ongoing reflexive practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following Biglia and Vergés Bosch (2016), we view feminist research as a situated and engaged way of producing knowledge. This perspective raised questions such as: Are we open to findings that challenge our assumptions? Do our interpretations reflect or obscure participants' voices? How does our presence shape the data? These questions informed key methodological choices. While the research design and analysis were collaborative, all interviews were conducted by the first author, with the support of one of the other two authors. The first author shares generational, political, and geographical ties with participants—and is actively involved in one of the activist groups studied. This proximity eased access, built trust, and enabled horizontal, egalitarian conversations, core to feminist research. Yet it also posed methodological and ethical challenges: emotional and political involvement heightened the risk of assumed shared meanings and reduced analytical distance. These biases were addressed through ongoing reflexivity and triangulation with the second and third authors, who, as outsiders to the groups, provided critical distance and helped refine interpretations—especially in interviews with

members of the first author's group. This interplay of proximity and distance enriched the analysis and supported the relationships formed during the research.

Following Archer's (2003, 2007) relational reflexivity, we shared our findings with external researchers from our group and the INCASI2 project, who provided critical, situated input that helped us reflect on the implications of our knowledge production. As part of our feminist, situated approach, we also held a feedback session in a non-academic, accessible, and safe space. There, participants could learn about preliminary results, share impressions, and provide anonymous feedback. This helped refine our interpretations and reaffirmed our commitment to centering participants' voices and agency.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Barcelona and previously approved by its Bioethics Committee (IRB00003099) on 12 June 2023. Participants were informed that interviews were academic and not therapeutic. Given the intimate yet socially embedded topics, the interview script was flexible, allowing for social analysis over personal disclosure if preferred. This fostered a trust-based environment. While some interviews were emotionally intense, all participants reported feeling comfortable, highlighting the role of reflexivity as both an ethical and methodological tool.

Data Trustworthiness

Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, we applied four principles: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through ongoing reflexive dialogue among authors and with external researchers (see Reflexivity). Transferability was addressed by detailing participant profiles and selection criteria (see Participants). Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of methodological decisions (see Procedure and Data Analysis). Confirmability was strengthened by including direct quotations and maintaining attention to positionality and reflexivity throughout the study.

Results

Below, we present the results of our research. In exploring whether young women express a desire for motherhood and how they envisage their potential maternal practices, our aim was to identify the extent to which aspects of neoliberal subjectification have influenced their subjectivities. At the same time, we sought to understand how feminist and social reproduction activism, material conditions for social

reproduction, and the cultural legacy shaped their desires and imaginings of motherhood (Table 1). We identified four key themes which are summarised in Table 2.

Between Motherhood as a Limitation on Personal Development and the Desire for Intensive Maternity

Most of our interviewees expressed a desire to become mothers, although it was not a firmly established one. Among the women we interviewed, three were clear in their decision not to have children, while another three were certain they did wish to become mothers. The remainder of our sample expressed an undecided desire for motherhood.

The participants' narratives revealed a consistent awareness that maternity could represent a limitation on self-realisation. Both those who did not wish to become mothers and those who were unsure emphasised that remaining childless could allow them a more hedonistic, worry-free, and independent life—one in which they would not have to give up as much. In this regard Julia, a bisexual woman with a non-cohabiting partner, who works and studies, and tends more towards childlessness than motherhood exposes:

Remaining childless would give me freedom above all. For example, I love travelling, and people say you can still travel, but if I think of travelling with children and a guide, that's not appealing to me; and going across the world to visit an amusement park... that's not appealing either [...] It's also about not having so many concerns, better managing my time, thinking more about myself, and the economy too... I think having a child costs a crazy amount of money and means compromising one's life.

Even among those who did want to become mothers, there was strong concern about preserving their own spaces for personal and professional development, self-care, friendship, and involvement in political and community life. Therefore, these women stressed the importance of continuing to develop their identities beyond motherhood, acknowledging that becoming a mother could easily take centre stage. Belén, an unemployed bisexual woman with an intermittent desire for motherhood, clearly voiced this concern:

Right now, I see more negatives than positives in being a mother. I don't know how I'd feel about saying goodbye to myself forever. I think it would mean stopping being myself to become two people. I don't know how I'd feel about saying goodbye to my personal identity and everything I've done.

Table 1 Sociodemographic Information of the Interviewees

	Pseudonym	Sexual orientation	Age	Job/occupation	Education	Working hours	Monthly income	Sex-affective bonds	Feminist organization affiliation
1	Mar	Bisexual	26	Coordinator of a city council project	Social Education - University degree	Part-time	From 1001 to 1200 euros	Without partner	<i>Assemblea feminista d'Habitatge Raval Rebel</i> [Raval Rebel Feminist Assembly for Housing]
2	Clara	Bisexual	26	Educational projects technician	Gender Studies – Master degree	Part-time	Between 601 and 1000 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Acció Ecofeminista</i> [Ecofeminist Action] and <i>Cooperacció</i> [Cooperation]
3	Marta	Bisexual	27	Primary school teacher	Primary education - University degree	Full-time	Between 1601 to 2100 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Cortsenques Dissidents</i> [Dissident Women from Les Corts]
4	Aurora	Non-defined	29	Technician in school absenteeism	Sociology – University Degree	Full-time	Between 1201 to 1600 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Maresme Feminista</i> [Feminist Maresme]
5	Coral	Heterosexual	22	University researcher	Gender Studies – Master's Degree	Full-time	Between 1001 to 1200 euros	Without a partner	<i>Moviment Democràtic de Dones</i> [Women's Democratic Movement]
6	Lucía	Bisexual	25	Digital marketing intern	Marketing Studies – Superior Degree	Part-time	Between 351 to 600 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Espai Feminista de Sants</i> [Sants Feminist Space]
7	Erica	Bisexual	30	Secondary school teacher	Social Education - University degree	Full-time	Between 1601 to 2100 euros	Without a stable partner	<i>Akelarre l'Hospitalet</i>
8	Marga	Bisexual	24	No work activity	Sociology – University Degree		Up to 350 euros. Rental assistance	Without a partner	<i>Col·lectiu Feminista Ante-Belüm</i> [Ante-Belüm Feminist Group]
9	Belén	Bisexual	26	No work activity	Tourism - University Degree		Between 351 to 600 euros (unemployment benefit)	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Assemblea Feminista de Rubí</i> [Rubí Feminist Assembly]
10	Paula	Lesbian	27	Political party worker	Political Communication - Master's Degree	Full-time	Between 1601 to 2100 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Cortsenques Dissidents</i> [Dissident Women from Les Corts]
11	Isabel	Non-defined	28	Energy consultant	Mechanical Engineering - University Degree	Full-time	Between 1201 to 1600 euros	Cohabiting partner	<i>Acció Ecofeminista</i> [Ecofeminist Action]
12	Mònica	Bisexual	23	No work activity	Sociology – University Degree		Up to 350 euros	Without a partner	<i>Assemblea d'estudiants de la Universitat de Barcelona</i> [University of Barcelona Student Assembly]
13	Àngels	Bisexual	24	No work activity	Sociology – University Degree		Between 351 to 600 euros	Without a partner	<i>Assemblea d'estudiants de la Universitat de Barcelona</i> [University of Barcelona Student Assembly]
14	Enara	Bisexual	22	English teacher for children and singer	Audiovisual production and production – Superior Degree	Part-time	Between 601 and 1000 euros	Without a partner	<i>Akelarre l'Hospitalet</i>

Table 1 (continued)

	Pseudonym	Sexual orientation	Age	Job/occupation	Education	Working hours	Monthly income	Sex-affective bonds	Feminist organization affiliation
15	Laia	Heterosexual	28	Employment counsellor	Primary Education and Social Education - University Degree	Full-time	Between 1201 to 1600 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Comissió de Gènere- Grup Escolta de Catalunya</i> [Gender Committee-Catalan Scouts]
16	Núria	Heterosexual	28	Private tutor	Spanish as a Foreign Language Teacher - Master's Degree	Part-time	Between 351 to 600 euros	Cohabiting partner	<i>Moviment Democràtic de Dones</i> [Women's Democratic Movement]
17	Catalina	Lesbian	29	Resident doctor	Medicine - University Degree	Full-time	Between 1601 to 2100 euros	Without a partner	<i>Grup d'Habitatge de les Corts</i> [Les Corts Housing Group]
18	Júlia	Bisexual	26	Administrative	Criminology - University Degree	Part-time	Between 601 to 1000 euros	Non-cohabiting partner	<i>Espai Feminista de Sants</i> [Sants Feminist Space]
19	Petra	Bisexual	26	Resident doctor	Medicine - University Degree	Full-time	Between 1601 to 2100 euros	Without a partner	<i>Sindicat d'Habitatge de l'Eixample Esquerra</i> [Left Eixample Housing Union]

Note. The minimum interprofessional wage in the Spanish state was €1,050 at the time of the interviews

Table 2 Summary of Themes

Theme	Description	Example
Between Motherhood as a Limitation on Personal Development and the Desire for Intensive Maternity	Tension between the desire to experience an intense and emotionally fulfilling motherhood and the concern about losing autonomy, time, and personal space, with a strong awareness of the sacrifices involved	"I think what not being a mother would bring me is freedom — being able to always keep my goals and priorities on the table without having to adapt them to someone else. It's always easier when you only depend on yourself than when you also depend on another person and have to make everything fit to have a child. So, ten years from now, I see myself half the year working around Europe in a van, and the other half just traveling." (Àngels)
Precarious Life Conditions as a Determining Factor for Maternity	Ongoing negotiation between the desire or possibility of motherhood and the material conditions of life, shaped by work, housing, and time precariousness, and marked by instability, uncertainty, and the search for future security	"I see my professional future as either working a lot with no labour rights, or the complete opposite [...] And both I, and we as a generation, need certain guarantees: employment, not feeling stuck, and ecological and living security. Right now, I have none of that, so of course it affects how I think about motherhood." (Belén)
Demystifying Maternity	Questioning of maternal instinct as a biological mandate and breaking away from the idea that motherhood defines what it means to be a woman, driven by feminist discourses that make visible its most silenced dimensions	"These spaces have taken a lot of pressure off me, being able to talk about things that can happen when you're a mother, like postpartum depression, like all the things that I think would happen to me if I were a mother. As well as seeing that you can live in many different ways and that you can talk about this topic with people who can understand me." (Aurora)
Imagining New Ways of Mothering and Encountering Limits Within Feminist Identity	Exploration of collective and non-normative forms of child-rearing, in tension with structural and emotional limits that still tie motherhood to the biparental and monogamous couple model.	"Together with other women and through feminism, we are rethinking motherhood quite a lot in terms of housing. One idea I really like—if it were viable—is cooperative housing, where you have your own privacy but also shared spaces. Sharing the responsibility among more people, especially if everyone lives nearby, could make it more manageable. Another idea I had was, instead of choosing an anonymous donor, finding someone who also wants to be a father, even though I'm a lesbian." (Paula)

The accounts of all our interviewees showed that the idea of constructing a “biography of one’s own choosing” played a significant role in how young women approached life planning (Baker, 2008; Rutherford, 2018). However, we should not overlook that their feminist ideology—rather than neoliberal subjection—may better account for the autonomy with which they shape their life paths. Moreover, in connection with their feminist identities, many were concerned that motherhood might suppress other aspects of their lives, particularly their political and community engagement. Additionally, they expressed that their concerns about the global political situation and about issues such as precarity, environmental degradation, and patriarchy made them deeply uncertain about the decision to become mothers.

When speaking of the limitations imposed by motherhood, participants did not consider a central issue the fact that they might be forced to give up their professional careers. In this respect, they diverged from the neoliberal ideal of the “multifaceted” woman (McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Rottenberg, 2013, 2017). Many stated that their professional careers should never be the most central or preeminent aspect of their lives. They often emphasized that their own mothers had experienced motherhood as a burden marked by guilt and self-sacrifice, largely due to the difficulty of balancing work and childcare. Mar, a bisexual young woman with a full-time job, is certain she wants to become a mother—though doubts whether it will be possible. She explained that motherhood, not her career, would take priority:

I think [motherhood] would really be my top priority. I have contradictory feelings about it. There’s a part of me that says, “no, you must have your own hobbies... if you’re a mother, you can’t be just a mother, you have to do other things.” But if I had the chance to experience motherhood, should my job really be the top priority? Sometimes I think: “it shouldn’t be that way.”

Their narratives did not reflect efforts to achieve a calculated balance between a successful career and a happy family life. Therefore, there is no passive internalization of the norm, but rather active and situated negotiations with imposed neoliberal demands (Foucault, 1976/1978, 1982). This partial rejection of the ideal of the multifaceted woman may constitute a form of micro-resistance that challenges neoliberal rationality at the level of everyday subjectivity (McNay, 2004). This is reflected in the fact that none of the interviewees mentioned egg freezing as a strategy to delay motherhood, nor did they refer to the possibility of resourcing to assisted reproduction techniques to pursue motherhood later in life—despite the fact that in the Spanish context these are well-known kind of business (Lafuente Funes, 2021; Rottenberg, 2013).

While those who wished to become mothers did express concern about the sacrifices involved, some other women stated that their maternal project should take centre stage in their lives and be intensely focused on meeting their children’s emotional needs. The spoke of maternity as a unique, self-fulfilling experience they would like to live through, or a chance to become their “best self.” Their narratives emphasised communication, affection, happiness, freedom, emotional expression, and their future children’s mental health. Enara, a bisexual woman with no current sex-affective relationship, who is firmly committed to becoming a mother—with or without a partner—expressed this perspective:

I’d like, for instance, to take my kid to therapy. I know that, when the time comes, you just do what you can, but I’d like him or her to be brought up with a lot of empathy, respect for others, freedom regarding sexual orientation, and with a strong presence of cultural diversity and feminism.

Similarly, they often stated they would like to remain close to their children at all the stages in their lives, offering them the kind of comprehensive care they felt had been lacking in their own upbringings. Their accounts of imagined motherhood practices thus aligned with the notion of *intensive motherhood*, which can be promoted within a neoliberal context (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014). However, this form of motherhood also resonates with strands of “maternity-inclusive” feminism that value intensive mothering for its affirmation of a feminine identity rooted in life-giving (Cañero Ruiz, 2022; Vivas, 2020).

Precarious Life Conditions as a Determining Factor for Maternity

Our interviewees’ accounts revealed that present and future job precariousness, limited access to housing, persistent indebtedness for basic products, goods and services, anticipated difficulties in balancing work and life, and the instability of sex-affective relationships all shape the way they conceive their maternity projects.

Both those considering remaining childless and those inclined toward motherhood expressed that becoming a mother would likely involve increased discomfort, debt, and precariousness. Some admitted to feeling “horror” or “fear” at the idea of having children under their current material circumstances and with their limited time availability.

In particular, we found that the uncertainty linked to women’s relationships with the labour and housing markets affected both their professional and personal lives and, by extension, the way they imagined and conceived of motherhood. This

awareness gave rise to numerous questions and doubts about the feasibility of becoming mothers. Marga, who is studying for a master's degree, unemployed, and living on unemployment benefits, captured this sentiment when she remarked "If I had a stable job, then I'd like to be a mother, but I'm afraid of the prospect of being forced to uphold both the emotional and the material sides at all times."

Some young women also noted that the uncertainty and short duration of their sex-affective relationships directly influence both their desire for motherhood and how they imagine they would act if they became mothers. Catalina, a young lesbian woman without a partner who is certain that she wants to be a mother, put it this way:

I always feel that it's difficult to find someone and build the kind of relationship I'd like. Tinder and OkCupid have been useful, but I get the feeling people are just messing around because it's trendy... and now everyone I know is on Tinder, and in the end, you always feel like second best and things will get even more difficult if I ever want to be a mother.

Our participants' accounts showed that precariousness manifested across various areas of life. The maternal project appeared as only one among many possible life choices in a hostile context shaped by the job insecurity young women are particularly exposed to (Gálvez Muñoz & Torres López, 2010), by the lack of public infrastructure to prevent women from bearing the full burden of care work (Flaquer, 2004; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018; Moreno et al., 2017; Naldini, 2003) and by increasingly unstable and short-lived sex-affective relationships (Castrillo Bustamante, 2016). In this context, many young women saw remaining childless as a very real possibility. Thus, we see how decisions about maternity in an adverse situation help explain the low fertility rates in the region under study (Delgado, 2022). We found that participants' cost-benefit reasoning was focused more on reducing future risk and uncertainty (Lazzarato, 2013) than on maximising professional, familial, social, or personal fulfilment (Alemán, 2021; Brown, 2015; Laval & Dardot, 2015). Similarly, this reasoning was oriented toward achieving a dignified life in a context in which the social reproduction of life continues to depend on the family and on women's labour, as well as on processes of care commodification and financialization that sustain households (Adkins, 2019). Thus, we argue that the option of not becoming mothers in order to avoid more acute situations of life precariousness constitutes an adjustment to material realities, but also a decision and a form of resistance grounded in agency, showing a refusal to accept certain living conditions (Butler, 2006; McNay, 2004).

De-Mystifying Maternity

All our interviewees acknowledged that their participation in feminist groups had enabled them to reflect on issues related to gender roles within the couple, the centrality of sex-affective relationships, the functions of the family, the notion of a "maternal instinct," and the nature of maternity itself. For young women today, maternity is no longer conceived as the central life project it was for previous generations. Most participants stated that while maternity remains a valid option, it is no longer seen as the defining feature of womanhood. They recognised that they had moved beyond the conception of maternal love as innate, and, at the same time, they rejected the idea that one must become a mother to be a complete woman. In addition, they were highly critical of the stigma imposed on childless women. Marta, who strongly wished to become a mother, but whose feminist activism had led her to question this desire, described the influence of feminist spaces: "It has influenced my ideas about both maternity and relationships. It made me understand that being a woman is much more than simply the capacity to reproduce. It also helped me discover historical feminist figures who remained childless."

Interviewees also noted that feminist spaces provided opportunities to learn about and discuss the more silenced aspects of maternity, such as post-partum depression, regret, pregnancy termination, obstetric violence, and perinatal bereavement. These discussions have gained greater social visibility and, today, these issues have become increasingly present in social networks and media within the Catalan context.

Nevertheless, we believe it was the most recent wave of feminism—rising to prominence in Spain and Catalonia following the international strike of 8 March 2018, whose goal was to show that "the world stops without us"—that truly ignited public debate about maternity. The feminist movement's capacity to highlight both male violence and the invisibility of care work—made even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic—has exposed the over-exploitation of women as mothers, the stigma directed at "bad mothers" and women who do not have children, and systemic issues such as obstetric violence. These debates represent a significant rupture with the prevailing conception of maternity in the Spanish state, one rooted in a strongly familistic ideology supported by powerful conservative sectors (Alabao, 2020; Carmona et al., 2012). The young women we interviewed participated in intense discussions that question the neoliberal ideal of the woman as a happy, entrepreneurial mother (Rottenberg, 2013, 2017).

Imagining New Ways of Mothering and Encountering Limits Within Feminist Identity

Our interviewees' narratives underscored the importance they attach to care, one of the key features of the new feminist wave, which has brought the politics of social reproduction to the forefront. This new interpretative framework, focused on the idea of building "the commons," has made it possible to acknowledge and highly value our interdependence as the human beings we are (Fraser, 2023; Herrero, 2021). In line with these ideas, some participants engaged in mutual aid experiences in their communities, which shaped their views on child-rearing. Petra, a bisexual woman active in the housing rights movement in Barcelona, described the benefits of these networks for children:

When I began to be an activist, it was like "an explosion inside my head" to see that it was possible to create political communities so that people get to know each other... One day I pick up the children from school, the next day you do... Then there's the issue of food collection—we have a food collection network, and we have community meals every Saturday, and that's also a space for the children in the neighbourhood to meet, and for mothers to get to know each other.

This new interpretive framework helps explain why our interviewees repeatedly spoke of building a "tribe," of shared maternity, and of becoming mothers alongside friends and co-mothering their potential future children. Some highly valued housing cooperatives with communal spaces and collective childcare initiatives. Coral, a heterosexual young woman who had recently experienced a traumatic breakup and was uncertain about motherhood, explained:

Lately I've been thinking about mothering with friends, although there's still quite a stigma attached to that. But I've talked with a couple of friends, and that could also be an option, couldn't it? Just having that model available is already something important... I really believe in solidarity bonds, and I think raising children with other women would be a kind of triumph... I think it would be much easier to raise children with other women than with one or two men... I think solidarity could be a tool for achieving a more egalitarian distribution of care time.

By placing community-based forms of mothering at the centre, many participants expressed that the responsibility for providing the needed support when one is raising a child should not fall solely on one's family. In particular,

some were critical of the dominant role grandmothers are expected to play in childcare in both Spanish and Catalan societies.

Participants also emphasised that maternity need not occur within a heterosexual or monogamous relationship. In fact, more than half of our interviewees identified as bisexual, and several were exploring relationships beyond monogamy and heteronormativity. However, their narratives also revealed the difficulties to realise of these alternative ways of child-rearing. Most young women still linked their maternal projects to the formation of sex-affective relationships. The majority of bisexual participants currently in relationships with men highlighted the fact that they imagined motherhood alongside a man. Erika, bisexual and currently in a non-cohabiting relationship with a man, noted that she could not imagine motherhood within an open relationship:

I picture motherhood as part of a couple—not as a single mother or anything like that, but with a partner. And in my head, that partner is a man. I've never thought about whether, if I had a child, I would keep an open relationship, you know? It's like... how would you manage that? Sometimes I already feel overwhelmed having two men in my life—imagine being a mother with two guys... That would be so confusing.

Overall, the young women recognised that, even as they considered radically challenging conventional norms and they are in the process of constructing (or de-constructing) their subjectivities as feminists, the model of the two-parent family still held significant sway in how they imagined maternity due to their primary socialisation in a strongly familistic context.

They also pointed to structural barriers, such as existing laws and the lack of public policies aimed at overcoming biparental families; the absence of widely recognised models for organising collective living; and the difficulty of finding people willing to commit to community-based parenting projects. These factors led many to conclude that a two-person family was still a safe context in which to raise a child.

We observed the emergence of new proposals for how to mother and raise children, but these have yet to solidify into fully viable models for "how to form a family." In this new wave of feminism, their understanding of social reproduction has allowed them to advocate for a revaluation of care and to imagine child-rearing as a communal experience and a shared responsibility. This clearly distinguishes their position from that of neoliberal feminism, which frames maternity as a freely chosen, self-sufficient project that requires no public support or state-provided services (Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2022). In contrast,

for our participants, maternal projects were fundamentally dependent on relationships of reciprocity, support networks, and the availability of community-based services. Although the break with the heteronormative family is not absolute in their imaginaries, the women interviewed are able to generate forms of resistance to a gender performativity that, in the neoliberal context, is built on the idea that women must be mothers and sustain a self-sufficient family (Butler, 1990, 2004).

Discussion

Our study revealed four major results. First, many of the participants expressed a desire to become mothers, although this desire was not yet solidified. They acknowledged that motherhood could represent a limitation on personal development. Paradoxically, those who did want to become mothers imagined an intense and highly committed project. Second, the participants highlighted the uncertainty surrounding motherhood due to the precarious conditions they face. As a result, many believed it was highly likely that they would ultimately have to forgo motherhood. Third, these young women, thanks to their feminist activism, have undergone a degree of demystification of the maternal project and no longer view it as essential to their lives. Fourth, they imagine new, more community-based ways of raising and educating children that challenge the heterosexual, biparental family model. However, they also identify clear limits to the realisation of these alternative forms of child-rearing and cohabitation, due to cultural legacies and the prevailing social and economic context.

Our findings show that the young women we interviewed do not construct their future imaginaries in alignment with the “multifaceted woman” figure typical of female neoliberal subjection, as properly described by Rottenberg (2013, 2017). Therefore, they distance themselves from mothering ideals such as the “yummy mummy” or the “enterprising mother” (Allen & Osgood, 2009; Jermyn, 2008; Littler, 2013; Malatzky, 2017; McRobbie, 2013). Rather, the women interviewed express that motherhood may be a limitation to personal development and self-fulfilment. In this sense, it is evident that they seek to construct a “biography of choice” (Rutherford, 2018) which may be reinforced by the social construction of young women as “ideal neoliberal subjects” (Rutherford, 2018). However, their narratives suggest that it is their feminist ideology—rather than neoliberal subjection—that best explains their desire to live freely and independently. It is clear to us that their imaginaries tell us of alternative lives, committed to an anti-patriarchal and often anti-systemic struggles.

Product of adherence to a feminism that asserts the centrality of social reproduction, may also explain why they conceive of motherhood as an intense and committed project. While this could be interpreted through the lens of intensive mothering associated with neoliberal ideology (Hays, 1996; Osborne, 1993; Vandenbeld Giles, 2014), our data suggest that it is more accurately explained by a feminist orientation focused on care and which also includes, at least in part, a mother-inclusive feminist strand (Cañero Ruiz, 2022; Vivas, 2020).

In any case, the narratives of these young women reveal significant doubts about the maternal project, rooted in a chronic sense of uncertainty and unease, which hinders their ability to articulate long-term life plans (Recalcati, 2008). These women are acutely aware that they will be the ones expected to resolve the challenges involved in the reproduction of life due to a weak protective public infrastructure and a labour market that demands maximum productivity and competitiveness from them, while simultaneously offloading the risks of precarity onto their shoulders. Despite this uncertainty about the future, these young women do not appear to be considering assisted reproduction techniques or egg vitrification as future options to enable delayed motherhood. Rather, they see the possibility of renouncing motherhood as a valid life path, thus confirming that low fertility rates may well remain a trend in the Spanish state in coming generations (Delgado, 2022; Jurado-Guerrero & Naldini, 2018). Thus, their decisions appear to be more shaped by the harsher realities of the neoliberal regime (Fernández-Savater, 2024; Lazzarato, 2013) than by what is commonly described as neoliberal subjection or, more specifically, as female neoliberal subjection.

In this regard, drawing from the Marxist school of social reproduction theory, we can argue that the logic of female subjectivation, especially in relation to the maternal project, depends on the material conditions available for the reproduction of life (Arruzza & Bhattacharya, 2020; Berkowitz & Mann, 2023; Ferguson, 2016, 2020; Vogel, 1983), and on how these conditions are evaluated against certain life standards. These insights help us understand how our participants assess that current and foreseeable living conditions do not meet the life standards they consider necessary for pursuing pregnancy and child-rearing. Once again, precariousness in multiple areas of life, the persistence of familism in the Spanish state, and, moreover, a conception of motherhood as necessarily dedicated and intensive shape this evaluation.

Nonetheless, material relations with the world are not the only factor enabling us to understand the modes and intensity of neoliberal subjection and its influence on women's maternal projects. Thus, following this perspective, we can argue that the social reproduction of life and both the

standards and conditions required for it are always subject to political struggle (Camps Calvet et al., 2024; Ferguson, 2016; Fraser, 2023; Norton & Katz, 2017; Vogel, 1983). The meanings attributed to motherhood are not fixed but are continuously negotiated in contexts of material precariousness and weak public care infrastructures.

In this sense, the narratives and activism of the young women studied clearly entails a dispute about who should hold responsibility for social reproduction and what place it should occupy in society. This dispute is expressed in how they demystify maternity and envision forms of child-rearing that break away from the heterosexual, biparental family model in favour of more communal arrangements. Unlike second-wave feminism, which advocated for the state to strengthen its redistributive responsibilities and implement public policies to support women's time management (Fraser, 2009; McRobbie, 2013; Wall, 2013), and unlike neoliberal feminism, which views motherhood as a self-sufficient project (McRobbie, 2009, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2022), the young women in our study articulate alternative demands. They call for both feminist-informed public policies and the creation of community-based structures of mutual responsibility, placing relations of interdependence and care at the centre. This highlights that women's subjectivation logic is also shaped by political ideology and by the broader context of political struggle in which women live.

Moreover, from a Foucauldian perspective, the participants' narratives and perceptions of motherhood can be interpreted as expressions of everyday resistance to material precariousness, neoliberal rationality and patriarchy. These everyday resistances do not take the form of openly oppositional or fully conscious stances constructed solely through the material conditions that shape them or through feminist activism, but are also expressed as partial and ambivalent negotiations with dominant norms at the subjective level, as entailed by neoliberal rationality (Butler, 1990, 2004; Foucault, 1976/1978, 1982; McNay, 2003, 2004, 2013). The very act of questioning the demand to be multifaceted and self-sufficient women, or of questioning motherhood itself in a reality marked by labour and housing difficulties, can thus be understood as a form of micropolitical everyday resistance within biographies that unfold under neoliberalism and are imbricated in its rationality.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite all, this study has limitations, notably its small sample size, which restricts broader comparisons and stronger confirmation of findings. While the sample shows heterogeneity in sexual orientation, professional trajectories, and attitudes toward motherhood, all participants are white, cis-gender, educated women.

Future research should devote greater attention to matters of class position and race (Arteaga Aguirre et al., 2020; McConnon et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2022) and to how these dimensions relate to women's reproductive plans, their "reproductive elections" (Rutherford, 2018), and their lived experiences of maternity. It would also be valuable to include the voices of women who do not identify as feminists or who are not actively involved in feminist movements, in order to enable comparative analyses between their discourse and experiences and those included in this paper. In addition, incorporating the perspectives of non-binary and queer individuals is essential, as their experiences may reveal alternative and underexplored dimensions of the representation of motherhood in a neoliberal context.

We also acknowledge that perceptions and experiences of motherhood are dynamic and may shift over time, depending on the life stage of the individuals involved. Recent research suggests that ideologies surrounding motherhood tend to intensify following childbirth, and that women's attitudes toward gender roles often become more traditional after becoming mothers (Loyal et al., 2021). In light of this, future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach, allowing for an examination of how discourses and practices around motherhood evolve over time.

Practice Implications

The findings of this study shed light on Spain's low fertility rates and highlight the urgent need for public policies that address the structural conditions influencing women's reproductive choices. Young women are not delaying or rejecting motherhood solely for personal reasons; their decisions are shaped by job insecurity, unaffordable housing, and the lack of a strong public care infrastructure.

These results have important implications for psychologists and therapists working with young women. Mental health professionals must recognize how socioeconomic conditions affect reproductive decisions and avoid pathologizing what are often adaptive responses to structural adversity. In this sense, doubts about motherhood or the postponement of reproductive decisions may also express forms of agency and everyday resistance to neoliberal and patriarchal expectations, rather than merely individual deficits.

The findings may also help family members and others in women's social circles better understand contemporary reproductive decisions. Doubts about motherhood should be seen as thoughtful, legitimate responses to complex social realities and shifting views on women's roles—an understanding that could reduce social pressure and foster empathy for evolving family models. The research further highlights the influence of feminism on young activists'

views of motherhood, offering insights for feminist movements to reflect on their discourses around reproduction and to develop more effective strategies for supporting women. It also points to the need for alternative models of motherhood and care.

Lastly, the study challenges individualistic models of reproductive decision-making by placing social context at the center. It underscores the value of qualitative research in capturing lived reproductive experiences often missed by quantitative surveys—an important methodological contribution to understanding fertility decline in Spain and Southern Europe.

Conclusion

This qualitative study expands our understanding of the concept of female neoliberal subjection by examining the maternal imaginaries of young cisgender women who are precarious and politically active in feminist and social reproduction movements in Spain and Catalonia. The findings reveal that the neoliberal ideal of the mother-woman is not uniformly articulated. We have seen how the capacity for the social reproduction of life, the nature of feminist struggle, and everyday forms of resistance in a given context influence both the desire for motherhood and the ways in which maternity is imagined—alongside the feasibility of achieving the neoliberal ideal of motherhood. Thus, one of the contributions of our study is that feminist Foucauldian approaches, which understand neoliberalism as producing and shaping new feminine subjectivities—where being a fulfilled and happy mother is central—must be complemented by a materialist feminist approach. Future research should extend this analysis to include racialised women, trans women, non-activists, those from different class and cultural backgrounds, and older women, to fully grasp the complexity of how maternal imaginaries are formed in the contemporary neoliberal context.

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Data Availability The authors declare that the data is available, but since it is entirely anonymous, the authors must keep it stored privately to ensure confidentiality. All data is properly cited in the text, with the participants' names anonymized, as explained in the methodology section.

Declarations

Ethical Considerations This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB00003099) of the Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona, approved in Barcelona on June 12, 2023.

Consent to Participate The authors declare that written informed consent was obtained from all participants for their inclusion in this study.

Consent for Publication The authors declare that written informed consent was obtained from all participants for the publication of the data collected in this study.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Clinical Trial Number Not applicable.

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