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Navigating norms and structures: young mothers' pathways to economic independence

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the complex relationships between childcare, education and work is crucial to acknowledging how young mothers express agency in their pathways to economic independence. Instead of considering them as a policy target group at risk for multiple reasons, this research reverses the perspective by focusing on young mothers' agency in school and paid employment. The study is set in the Netherlands, where economic independence has become a focal point of social policy and practice, especially for young people. It explores how young mothers navigate norms and structures of education and employment, drawing on 18 months of participant observation and 41 semi-structured interviews with young mothers. Notions of 'everyday' and 'bounded' agency are used in analysing structural limitations (e.g. irregular working hours in 'women's jobs', a lack of maternity leave at school) and norms (e.g. completing higher education and finding a good job versus being primary caretakers, enjoying children and being role models). School and workplace structures reinforce contradictory discourses of motherhood and economic independence. Young mothers exhibit agency in considering their options around job security, work experience, wages, student loans and spending time with children. In doing so, they navigate structural and normative collisions of economic independence and mothering.

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Introduction

Young mothers are commonly portrayed as 'at risk' or incapable of providing for themselves and their children. In societies that value 'young women's capacity for success in education and the labour market' (Allen and Osgood 2009, 13), motherhood is deemed inappropriate for young women (McDermott and Graham 2005; Schoon and Polek 2011). Contradictory norms about young femininity position young women as either power girls who can be whatever they want to be or as insecure girls who need (adult) interventions to become successful in life (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; Gonick

2006; Baker 2010). These norms are reinforced for young *mothers*, because being a mother at an early age is not considered successful.

Studies have shown that young motherhood is often constructed as a socioeconomic problem in social policy (Breheny and Stephens 2007; Arai 2009; Duncan, Edwards, and Alexander 2010). Government officials, policymakers and social workers expect young women to be in school or employed, and see their motherhood as a risk and an interruption of a pathway from school to work (Yates and Payne 2006; Yardley 2008; Finlay et al. 2010; Pulkingham, Fuller, and Kershaw 2010). They develop policies and special trajectories intended to help young mothers resume their 'interrupted' pathway to success. These policies tend to assume a 'proper' type of motherhood: above the age of 20, in a relationship, educated and not receiving welfare benefits but being 'responsible' by earning wages (Greene 2006; Heilborn, Brandão, and Cabral 2007; Rolfe 2008).

This article challenges such normative assumptions by focusing on young mothers' agency. Research claims that policymakers insufficiently acknowledge young mothers' agency and their life worlds, especially in areas where their agency collides with dominant norms (Duncan 2007; Shoveller et al. 2011). Stigma can function as legitimization of socio-economic policies that push young mothers 'towards the desired outcomes of labour market participation and self-sufficiency' despite their own alternative values and family belief systems (Yardley 2008, 683). Duncan (2007) and Yardley (2008) point to a difference in mindset between policymakers and young mothers when thinking of young motherhood in terms of value of life and economic self-reliance. Studies examining young mothers' experiences of their motherhood increasingly find that motherhood enhances resilience, responsibility and self-reliance (Duncan, Edwards, and Alexander 2010; Stapleton 2010). This article explores young mothers' agency; however, unlike the previously mentioned studies, we not only address their agency in motherhood but also in their educational and employment practices.

This study aims to provide insight into the complex structures and norms related to motherhood, education and work in order to show their impact on young mothers' lives and how these can be counterproductive for young mothers. It is set in the Netherlands, where economic independence has become a focal point of social policy and practice. The research question is: In which ways do young mothers navigate structures and norms of education and employment? Participant observation and in-depth interviews have led to findings in the empirical sections on young mothers' structural challenges in education and employment, and norms on mothering and economic independence. Young mothers' agency shows throughout, in navigating such structural barriers and contradictory norms.

Dutch norms related to education, employment and mothering

Understanding the relationship between norms for education, employment and motherhood is crucial to acknowledging how young mothers express agency in their pathways to economic independence. According to current thinking in the Netherlands, economic independence should ideally start with completing one's education (Inspectie SZW 2014). Students can choose among several options after completing primary school. For instance, they can continue on to a five-year secondary education (HAVO; ages 12–17) that prepares them for tertiary Bachelor's level studies at a university of applied sciences

(HBO), or to a six-year secondary education (VWO; ages 12–18) that prepares them for tertiary Master's level studies at a research university (WO). Another option is to continue with secondary vocational education (VMBO; ages 12–16) that prepares them for senior secondary vocational education (MBO). The latter has two educational routes: a work-based pathway providing practice-based education (BBL: '*beroepsbegeleidende leerweg*') with at least 60% of learning in the workplace; and a school-based pathway providing theory-based education (BOL: '*beroepsopleidende leerweg*') with 20–60% of learning in the workplace (Nuffic 2014).

BOL, Bachelor's and Master's students are eligible for student loans and do internships in workplaces, while BBL students cannot receive student loans but have contract-based paid employment (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2017). Student loans can be taken out for four years of education and, if students complete their education within 10 years, the loans become a grant that does not have to be repaid (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2017). That 10-year period can be extended under certain circumstances, but pregnancy, childbirth and childcare are not considered to be valid reasons for such an extension.

Single students with children living with them can also receive a student loan supplement for day-care costs for their children, also only limited to the formal study programme length. However, studying couples with children may not receive student loan supplements (Eleveld et al. 2016). All studying and working parents can receive subsidies for day care, but schools and the state do not offer childcare facilities, so young parents have to pay for private childcare services which are often unavailable due to lack of capacity.

Although the above incentives seem positive for students, they insufficiently accommodate motherhood. This article specifically explores the structural barriers to education faced by young mothers.

For Dutch young women, motherhood and education seem to rule each other out. Research shows that young, highly educated Dutch women feel pressured to have children and to participate in the labour market (Woertman and Van Mens-Verhulst 2010), but seem unable to do so simultaneously (Massink and Groenendijk 2014). Such stress reinforces the image of young women in crisis who cannot live up to the autonomy narrative (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; Baker 2010).

The Netherlands has one of the world's lowest birth rates for young women. The average age at which Dutch women have their first child is currently 29.6 years (CBS 2016). Some national and international studies claim this is because of successful birth control and family planning policies and practices (United Nations 2013; De Graaf and Beets 2015). In contrast, (Singh and Darroch 2000) conclude that for young women in what they call 'developed countries' (including the Netherlands), the greater importance attached to education and a lower aspiration for motherhood have led to declining adolescent birth rates. Another contributing factor is greater labour market participation by Dutch women (Van der Mooren 2015). For many young Dutch women, motherhood and employment thus seem to be competitive expectations and young motherhood seems to disrupt educational and employment pathways.

Dutch norms around motherhood, education and employment constitute a motherhood ideology of viewing women as child carers and men as breadwinners. Unlike in most European countries, couples in the Netherlands commonly conform to the 1.5

wage earner model, in which women usually work part-time and men full-time. Women usually perform the unpaid care and household tasks, even if they also have full-time paid employment (Merens and Van den Brakel 2014). Even though the 71% employment rate of Dutch women is higher than the 64% average in the European Union (EU), the Netherlands has by far the highest percentage of women (including women without children) in part-time employment (75%) of all EU countries (32% average) (Portegijs and Van den Brakel 2016). Although Dutch young women are more highly educated than young men, more men than women end up in permanent paid employment (Merens and Van den Brakel 2014).

Dutch people increasingly consider a mother to be more important in raising children than a father (Merens and Van den Brakel 2014). In fact, a growing number of young women and men expect men to mostly engage in paid employment and women to mainly care for children (Kloosterman and Moonen 2016). Such stereotypical, dominant gender patterns and norms around motherhood, education and employment characterise the Dutch society in which the young mothers in this study live: on the one hand, they are expected to be educated and participate in paid employment and, on the other hand, they are expected to stay at home and care for the children.

Notions of economic independence through education and employment are reflected in recent Dutch policy changes that aim to promote active socioeconomic participation in society by every citizen. Government programmes particularly target young people who are not in school or employed, attempting to encourage or force them to find suitable education or work (Nederland, Noordhuizen, and Van Dijk 2016). According to the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, young mothers, like all young Dutch people under the age of 27, should be working or studying to attain a starting qualification for employment so they will be able to live independently (Inspectie SZW 2014). Young women with children who depend on their partners for economic certainty, or young mothers without prospects for economic independence, are characterised by policy-makers as vulnerable, at risk and in need of support to find a job or get a diploma (Nederland, Noordhuizen, and Van Dijk 2016). A dominant Dutch policy aim is for young mothers to become economically independent through education leading to employment. This article takes education and employment as key elements of economic independence for young mothers. Instead of considering young mothers as a policy target group at risk for multiple reasons, it reverses the perspective by focusing on young mothers' agency in school and employment.

Agency of young mothers

In this paper, 'agency' is used to describe young mothers' navigation processes in a complex world of educational and employment structures and norms. This conceptualisation is informed by gender studies, development studies and philosophy, which emphasise that the concept of agency is usually entwined with the notion of coercion or inequality, but cannot be reduced to a binary opposition in which agency only manifests when oppression occurs (Mahmood 2001; Madhok, Wilson, and Phillips 2013; Rao 2015). Furthermore, Mahmood (2004) claims that agency can also lead to continuity or stability of a social situation. She sees agency as 'modalities of action' or multiple ways of resisting and inhabiting norms (Mahmood 2004, 153–154). Moreover, Rao (2015, 3) analyses

women's agency as 'a complex mix of subjection, conformity and resistance'. Both scholars place such 'modalities' of agency within the institutional structures and social norms, but allow for a diversity of engagements in which agency manifests. Therefore, young mothers' agency is explored as varying from their experiences of resisting or challenging norms on economic independence and motherhood to their practices that seem to adhere to such norms. Agency does not merely entail action, but can also mean contemplation and consideration.

The understanding of agency in this article furthermore draws on the notion of 'everyday' agency. This concept is often used in children's and youth studies that focus on young people in 'challenging socioeconomic circumstances' and on critical events in their life course (Durham 2000; Bordonaro 2012; Payne 2012), such as motherhood for young women. These studies recognise young people's agency in their everyday strategies, choices and ways of dealing with social situations and systems. We will explore young people's everyday engagement with social structures and norms, and focus on how young mothers navigate norms of economic independence in their everyday lives.

Addressing the relationship between everyday, individual experiences and social structures calls for understanding agency as 'bounded' (Evans 2007; Tomanović 2012; Aaltonen 2013; Munford and Sanders 2015). For Aaltonen (2013) this means recognising structural aspects of gender, ethnicity, social class and locality that influence young people's responses to events and also determine their agency. Evans (2007) explains that such 'bounded agency' can be understood as a mix of internalised, personal frames of reference and external, institutional influences. Young people's actions are not only shaped by their past and imagined futures, but by their reflections on and perceptions of the structures in their environment (Evans 2007). Other studies on young people (Tomanović 2012; Aaltonen 2013; Munford and Sanders 2015) have identified several 'focal arenas' where agency manifests: peer and family relations, educational structures and paths to employment. Our article focuses especially on young mothers as a specific group of young people who raise children, and on how these women experience educational and employment structures. Young mothers' agency is seen as shaped by individual experiences and considerations, as well as by structural influences and norms, particularly in education and employment.

Research methods

This article draws on participant observation and interviews to explore young mothers' perceptions of economic independence. Participant observation took place over 18 months, with informed consent, at weekly meetings of young mothers' groups hosted by two welfare organisations. These meetings took place in two main towns of Parkstad Limburg, a region in the southernmost province of the Netherlands, and the researcher alternated between the two meetings. In these meetings, the welfare organisations offer arts-and-crafts and baking activities, walks, visits to playgrounds and parks, and educational workshops on subjects such as budgeting or first aid. The main goals of these meetings are to support independent living and parenting, and to support the young mothers by providing contact with peers with whom they can share experiences and skills.

Participant observation at the meetings consisted of speaking with the women while having tea and biscuits, participating in the activities and playing with and minding children. Work and education were recurrent conversation topics and were themes in

workshops on, for example, student loans, job interviews, future plans and combining childcare with education. Youth workers led the meetings and planned and organised the programme together with the women.

We interviewed 41 young mothers aged 27 or younger who were living in Parkstad Limburg. 17 of them participated in the young mothers' groups almost weekly and 13 others attended a few times. The names of interviewees used in this article are pseudonyms.

We chose an age limit of 27 because social and economic welfare and education policy in the Netherlands officially regards people as young until the age of 27 (Inspectie SZW 2014). The interviewees all gave birth to their first child between the ages of 17 and 23. We chose that age range because, in Dutch welfare and youth work, women with children are generally seen as 'young mothers' up to the age of 23 (Hoogenboezem et al. 2010).

Even though we set maximum age limits, we set no minimum age limit for young motherhood. Four women who had their first child before the age of 17 attended the young mother groups a few times; one of them participated a few times while the researcher was present, and the others attended once. Unfortunately, we had too little contact to plan an interview. Despite numerous efforts (including snowball and purposive recruitment among young women and welfare, youth and health professionals), we were unable to interview any women who had their first child before the age of 17.

The population of Parkstad Limburg is declining due to an ageing population, declining fertility rates and an outmigration of highly educated young people (Ročak, Hospers, and Reverda 2016). Furthermore, Parkstad has lower education levels, higher unemployment rates and higher dependency on welfare than the Netherlands in general (Pommer, Eggink, and Ooms 2016; Ročak, Hospers, and Reverda 2016).

The research population reflects the region in terms of educational levels, employment and welfare dependency. 14 women were studying, five had jobs and 20 received welfare benefits. Ten women were single, seven were married and the others were in relationships. 12 women were living independently and 19 were cohabitating with their partners.

A limitation of the study is the rather homogenous research population: most women were ethnically native Dutch (31 women, see Table 1). Research shows that their situations differ from those of young mothers with ethnically diverse backgrounds (mainly Surinamese, Dutch Antillean, sub-Saharan African and Chinese), who for example experience unequal power structures in social relations and a lack of openness on sexuality (Cense and Dalmijn 2017). However, the ethnic homogeneity of the research population is representative of Parkstad's population.

Interviews were semi-structured and conducted by the first author, who also did the participant observation. The main topics were childcare, education, work, household activities, leisure time, daily routines and mothering; we chose them to explore everyday lives within institutional structures. All the interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim (except one, about which notes were written immediately after the interview). Short participant observation notes written during and after the meetings and encounters were worked out in detail on the same day by the first author. She analysed interview transcripts and participant observation records with the qualitative data analysis computer program Atlas.ti. The other researcher validated the process of data analysis and coding.

Table 1. Personal characteristics of young mothers at time of interview.

	Age of mother at first childbirth							Total (N = 41)
	17 (N = 3)	18 (N = 4)	19 (N = 12)	20 (N = 6)	21 (N = 8)	22 (N = 2)	23 (N = 6)	
<i>Number of children</i>								
1	2	2	11	3	6	1	4	29
2	1	1	1	3	1	1	2	10
3	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
<i>Income situation/work/study</i>								
Vocational-level student	2	1	5	0	2	0	0	10
Bachelor-level student	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
Master-level student	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Business owner	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Paid job	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	4
Partner has paid job	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	2
Welfare benefits	1	3	5	3	3	1	4	20
<i>Relationship</i>								
Partner (not married)	2	0	7	4	5	2	4	24
Married	1	1	2	0	2	0	1	7
Single	0	3	3	2	1	0	1	10
<i>Living situation</i>								
Living with partner	1	1	5	3	4	1	4	19
Living independently	1	0	4	2	4	0	1	12
Living with parent(s)	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	4
In shelter with other women	0	2	1	1	0	1	1	6
<i>Ethnic background</i>								
Mother and parent(s) born in the Netherlands	2	2	11	5	5	2	4	31
Mother and/or parent(s) born in non-Dutch, Western country	0	1	1	1	2	0	0	5
Mother and/or parent(s) born in non-Western country	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	5

An initial round of open coding (Robson 2011) led to codes such as ‘work experience’, ‘role model’ and ‘attending education’, followed by theory-induced coding, resulting in codes such as ‘educational ambitions’, ‘work strategies’ and ‘norms on motherhood’. Subsequently, we developed families of main themes around considerations, negotiations, control, strategies, dreams and norms, inspired by literature on agency.

Structural challenges related to education

Education was a recurring subject in interviews and group discussions, especially in relation to childcare. Valerie (23, two-year-old daughter) explained that after completing vocational-level social pedagogy studies she is going to work:

I have the capacity for Bachelor's degree level work, but my daughter will be two and I want another child. Combining a Bachelor and a child is harder than doing vocational studies with a child. And vocational is fine too for finding a job and raising two children.

Women like Valerie do not have the ‘luxury’ of choosing higher education. They abandon their ambition for higher education in favour of their mothering responsibilities. Additionally, young pregnant students or studying mothers (14 of 41, see Table 1) face various challenges at school. Schools expect full-time availability for education or internships; they do not expect motherhood and childbirth. Iris (20, one-year-old son), who studied animal care at a vocational level, illustrated the inflexibility of study programmes:

I was due August 11 and I had to start again on August 28, no matter what. And I would have had to make up for the lost hours before December, on top of the regular schoolwork. But I couldn't. So I changed schools so I could start in March and have time to take care of my son.

Since Iris's pregnancy made her different from other students, the regular school programme did not work for her. She ultimately changed schools because she found the first very unhelpful, but this also gave her extra time with her son.

Daphne (26, five-year-old son and three-year-old son), a social work student at the Bachelor's level, took different measures. She gave birth in her first year and is proud to have passed all her exams without resits:

They'd never seen this at school, giving birth and completing the year. How did I do that? I got all my coursework done and just didn't take much [maternity] leave: two weeks before Christmas holiday [of two weeks], and I came back one or two weeks later. And because I could not attend some classes, I asked for alternative assignments from my lecturer.

On the one hand, Daphne was lucky to give birth during a holiday. On the other hand, she worked hard and recovered quickly. Using holidays as maternity leave depends upon a woman's due date, which is a coincidental circumstance.

Although women in paid employment in the Netherlands are entitled to 16 weeks maternity leave (International Labour Office 2014), according to the young mothers, schools do not give students maternity leave. In fact, Dutch educational policy does not structurally include maternity leave (Eleveld et al. 2016). While child-rearing students in higher education can apply for funding to financially compensate four months of study delay, students at vocational levels are not eligible for such funding (Eleveld et al. 2016, 31). However, although most studying mothers of the present study were vocational students, the few in higher education were not aware of this funding. They found that double roles as mothers and students challenge inflexible educational structures. Their agency means actively arranging leave and assignments that work within these structures.

Moreover, the inflexibility of the study programme is reflected in the school advice given to Desiree (22, three-year-old son), a vocational-level hairdressing student:

My teacher said: "It will be best to put school on hold." Because if I were to continue during my pregnancy, I would miss a lot. And she said: "The others will continue with class. And everything you have missed, you will need to make up for. So if you stop this year, then you can come back later and start where you left off."

This implies that women with children do not belong at school, and that they have to solve their own 'problems'. On top of the changes that come with becoming a mother, young mothers like Desiree are advised to change their school careers.

Advising pregnant students to put school on hold could be supportive of them from a mothering perspective, but it is questionable from a viewpoint of economic independence. 'They just weren't used to it [...] They just didn't have a clue what to do with me', is how Irene (21, four-year-old son) explained such inflexibility and questionable support. Her experience (and that of others) shows that schools lack knowledge of and experience with young women with children. They find that school systems are insufficiently able to understand, adapt to and facilitate different study paces. These mothers demonstrate their agency by navigating such inflexible institutional structures while accommodating their own responsibilities.

Additionally, incidental school support is no solution for young mothers who need to successfully combine school with childcare. Daniëlle (18, four-month-old son) is studying to become a sports instructor. Since her son has health problems, she is allowed to attend school at her own pace, receive assignments from her teacher via email and keep up via WhatsApp. However, Sabine (20, one-year-old son), a vocational-level student in social pedagogy, finds it difficult to juggle her responsibilities when her daughter is ill: 'They'd rather have me present. If I am ill, I can stay home, but if *my child* is ill, they want me to come.' Consequently, Sabine goes to school when she is ill, so she can call in sick when her son is ill. In contrast, Valerie's teachers let her take her child to school if she cannot find a babysitter. She is hesitant to do so though, because this 'solution' distracts her from paying full attention to either the teacher or her daughter. These are all individual makeshift solutions.

Young mothers' agency reflects in assessing their priorities, which are bounded by educational demands and children's needs. Although teachers sometimes allow flexibility in young mothers' educational pathways, these women feel they cannot miss anything, because they might fail exams and delay their graduation. Their priorities are not in line with those of the schools: these women consider themselves to be mothers first and then students.

Finally, student loans are challenging for young mothers. The women in both young mothers' groups participated in workshops on educational possibilities, in which a civil servant explained student loan regulations. Even though all Dutch students can apply for government student loans, many young mothers consider them to be dangerous because they can cause them to get (back) into debt. Laurie (22, three-year-old son) first worked as a cashier and now participates in a municipal benefits scheme. She avoids debts by not attending formal education:

If I go to school, I have to apply for a student loan. And that means I should get my diploma in four years. I don't want to pay back the loan, if it takes longer. And I'd have to apply for an extra student loan, because otherwise I can't afford my house, groceries, diapers, nothing. So automatically I'll build up a debt.

Women like Laurie want to avoid being financially dependent. Indeed, if students do not finish their education within the required time, they have to repay the loan (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2017). A fear of not being able to graduate on time feeds their fear of debts.

That fear is warranted. Participant observation shows that these women constantly tend to their children's needs, take them for regular check-ups and nurse them when they are sick. Another Dutch study found that parenting students experience difficulties with mandatory class attendance and inflexible and last minute timetables, which often lead them to drop out or delay graduation, which increases debt from student loans (Eleveld et al. 2016). Thus, the student loan system, which aims to stimulate economic independence through advancing education, backfires for young mothers whose notions of economic independence are directly related to their current financial situations and childcare.

Structural challenges related to employment

In the Netherlands, education and employment are connected through internships and work experience positions. Irene explains how her educational choice is based on work

experience and job security: 'It is a four-year programme: the organisation takes you for four years and gives you a contract. I now have job security.' Other women also expect that the organisations where they work as part of their vocational education will 'keep' them after they have graduated and that they will be able to continue working there.

Although the Dutch Ministry of Education considers people attending theoretical vocational (BBL), Bachelor's or Master's programmes to be 'students', it considers people attending practical vocational school (BOL) to be 'employees' (Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs 2017). But, as Femke (21, two-year-old son) noted, these 'students' 'don't get paid by the company because you're an intern instead of an employee'.

Young mothers say that a lack of real work experience hinders their job applications. Valerie applied for a job, but experienced the following: 'They said: 'You don't have enough work experience'. But I think I do have enough work experience. Only they don't see it as work experience, but as an internship.'

Young mothers need 'real' work experience, job security and wages to provide for their children, which leads them into practical vocational education. But intertwined educational and employment structures, neither of which consider internships to be true work experience, determine the work practices of young mothers. This complexity bounds their agency when considering suitable pathways to independence. It appears that the structure of providing work experience hinders young mothers from pursuing higher education.

A common hindrance to combining motherhood and work is working hours that do not match childcare responsibilities or the operating hours of childcare centres. For instance, Melanie (20, one-year-old daughter) recently started working in a fast-food restaurant two evenings per week. She and her daughter moved in with her father, and both her parents work: 'My father isn't home much, because he owns a business. My mother wants to babysit a few hours, but she can't because of her own work. And day care is just too expensive.' Day-care or childcare centres rarely fulfil the childcare needs of such women. These structural challenges can occur in any working mother's life, but young mothers often have low-paid jobs and parents who also work, so they can rely less on childcare provided by their informal network. If they can rely on their parents, young mothers often live with them. Economic independence then means earning wages instead of living independently.

Furthermore, the type of work many young mothers choose limits their economic independence. Although some interviewees were working in shops or restaurants, most of them were doing social work or providing health care and care for older people (or were seeking such employment). In a training session about job interviews, the women mostly expressed interest in welfare and care jobs that enable them 'to help other people'. These are generally considered to be 'women's occupations' (Rolfe 2008) and are often characterised by low educational levels, low wages and irregular or night shifts.

Although care work is typically seen as a 'woman's job', it poses structural challenges that cause collisions between mothering and employment responsibilities. For example, Rachelle (23, six-year-old son) works in a nursing home. She has a partner, but lives with her son, parents and brother. She has intentionally stayed in her parents' home because of her son:

I work in the weekends too, irregular shifts. One week 40 h, another week 50 h, aside from school. My son is with my parents then. I'm lucky to have these possibilities at home. [...] My working hours are irregular: sometimes I have to start at 7:00 am, then at 4:30 pm, then at 1:30 pm. [...] My mother is at home, she looks after him. I can just give her my work schedule.

Rachelle's field of work and working hours do not match her family responsibilities, which Dutch day-care centres also do not accommodate. Mothers with similar low-paid work who live by themselves often must choose between employment or childcare. Rachelle works irregular shifts and feels 'lucky' that her mother can look after her son. A family willing and able to share their home and to care for her child enabled her choice to work.

Additionally, high day-care costs hinder young mothers' employment. The imbalance of wages and day-care costs is a recurring topic in mothers' groups and interviews. Marieke (26, three-year-old son and two two-year-old daughters) receives welfare benefits and her husband has paid work. She often complains that the municipality wants her to attend workshops on finding employment: 'When the municipality is nagging, sorry, but I can't just dump my children. We've calculated that if we bring them to a childcare centre, I'll lose my complete wages to childcare. So what's the use of working?' Structural limits that young mothers like Marieke face are that childcare centre costs are too high, which does not stimulate them to work. These women have no financial incentive to work, so they feel that they can better stay at home for the children. They demonstrate their agency in taking such a stand. For them, there is no choice or careful consideration; their children come first.

Norms related to mothering

From the above structural challenges to work and education, we can derive several norms that affect young mothers' everyday lives. Many young mothers subscribe to a Dutch motherhood ideology of women as primary caretakers. One societal norm on which they draw is that mothers should take care of their children themselves. Many interviewees (22 out of 41, see [Table 1](#)) did not go to school or work after their children were born. Wendy (22, four-year-old daughter, three-year-old daughter and pregnant) stated: 'I always think, I didn't make children to put them all away'. Like many others, she is clear that she did not give birth so that someone else could take care of her children. Moreover, many feel that mothers should be with their children, especially when they are little. As Patricia (24, five-year-old daughter) said: 'During her first years, someone had to stay with her, right? I couldn't get rid of her, could I?' The norm of having to take care of their children themselves seems stronger than an ambition to study or work.

Additionally, for young mothers, this norm might come from a fear of having their children taken away. In the Netherlands, a mother under the age of 18 initially has no formal authority over her children; the child is assigned a legal guardian (e.g. grandparents, youth care workers). However, when the mother turns 16, she can ask a judge to declare her an adult and give her formal authority over her children (Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie 2017). Irene, who was 17 when her son was born, explained how youth care workers came to her house soon afterward 'to see if it would be safe for him'. She has always feared her son's regular check-ups at the family health centre:

I've always had to account for everything. Youth care were always on my back. [...] They have very strict rules for teen mothers. Because for many it goes wrong; they want to prevent that. But for me that was terrible. Therefore, I've always been so insecure.

Irene suggests that she is a 'bad' mother if she cannot properly take care of her child, which reinforces the norm of mothers who should take care of their children themselves. She further explained that she received the first compliment about her son after she became adult: 'Then I noticed they'd let go'. Irene feels that, because of her age, she has to prove more than others that she provides a safe, nurturing and healthy environment. She demonstrates her agency by complying with the norm of taking care of her child herself, to affirm she is a 'good' mother.

Another dominant, traditional norm is that women are primary caretakers and men are breadwinners. Eveline (27, six-year-old son, four-year-old son, two-year-old daughter) said:

We live in a nice house. I don't need to work, my husband has a good job, I don't have to make the effort to apply for a job every day. I'd like to work, but only when my youngest is in school. So those are ways in which I'm lucky.

Women like Eveline value their caring responsibility as 'luck' over their individual economic independence as a 'must'. Additionally, Marieke expresses a norm that mothers should enjoy their children: 'I wouldn't mind working, but I refuse to now. First, I want to enjoy my children, and he [husband] does not think working [for me] is necessary either. As long as we make it [financially], then it's okay.' Both Eveline and Marieke have completed secondary vocational education; Eveline's husband is a medical doctor and Marieke's husband is a road worker. Although people from lower socioeconomic classes often hold traditional attitudes about gender (Merens and Van den Brakel 2014), here both husbands uphold the norm of a traditional family where women stay at home for the children and men provide the income. Young mothers like Marieke and Eveline express that they do not need paid jobs because their husbands support them. They consider paid employment to be a necessity rather than a joy, personal development or path to inclusion into social networks. They exhibit alternative perspectives on responsibility, independence and paid work. Economic independence means independence as a family, rather than as an individual. Children and family come first, while employment is considered a distraction from the joy of raising a family.

Although the women described above engage with a motherhood and care ideology, others engage with an ideology of independence and individual development. They explain they need other people to take care of their children because they are studying or working. For example, Daphne's two sons go to a day-care centre three days per week and to her mother twice a week. Floor (27, six-year-old daughter) also wants to be a role model: 'It's not who I am, sitting at home all day. What example would I be to my child? [...] I am responsible for her. I want to show her that life isn't only fun and you get money anyway.'

These women see themselves as role models. Especially since they are young, they want to show that they can make it on their own without welfare benefits. They want to teach their children that you need to work to earn money and become independent. Nevertheless, they do not justify their school or work from a narrative that shows how good it is to work, but from a motherhood perspective of being a role model to your child.

Bianca (26, six-year-old son and four-year-old son) purposefully challenged those norms by setting up a business. To do so, she had to change her workload from part-time to full-time. Her husband reduced his work to part-time and is now the primary caretaker:

Then we decided I'll work five days a week, so my partner will work less and take care of the children more. We're doing it the other way around. [...] I've always worked. Just being a mother, not working, I'd go crazy. If I didn't work and were home with my kids all day ... I couldn't do that. Because I find, after so many days at home, it's time to go to work again.

Bianca's quote illustrates that some women are happy to go to work to 'escape' all-day childcare and be someone other than a mother. She has actively changed her life to accommodate her role as full-time business owner. She feels she is a better mother when she works and is not the main caretaker. She demonstrates her agency by challenging the norms of women as primary caretakers who enjoy their children all day.

Norms related to economic independence

As seen in Bianca's example above, motherhood norms intersect with norms on work and education as a means to gaining economic independence. Almost half of the mothers (19 out of 41, see [Table 1](#)) work or study full-time, and have been doing so since the birth of their children.

One norm is that young people should be in school and should attain the highest possible level of education. Bianca attended the highest level of secondary school: 'I did well at school and had to do the highest level, because they knew I could do it. But I wanted to do beauty school at a vocational level. [...] I pushed my parents, so finally I could.' Bianca demonstrated her agency by deliberately challenging the norm that young people have to complete the highest possible level of education. She is even more exceptional because she not only completed her vocational education, but she had already started working, had children and set up her own business. A common path in life among Dutch young people is to get a degree first, start working and then have children (Van der Mooren 2015). Like other young mothers in this study, Bianca challenged this pathway.

Another prevailing norm of economic independence is finding a 'good' job, which means different things to different women. Nursing student Manon (26, five-year-old son) explains: 'I just want to be a good nurse, that's my dream'. Chayenna (20, two-year-old son, unemployed and without qualifications), describes what a 'good job' means for her: 'I've been through a lot myself. I want to try and help other young people. Support them with their problems.' These women do not dream of a 'career' as a businesswoman, but of a 'job' that entails doing meaningful work, preferably in their field of study.

Daphne, a Bachelor's student at a university of applied sciences, expresses a different ambition: 'I'd really like to go to [a research] university, but I don't have the money. So I really have to work [after graduation]. I hope to find a good job, at least earn money for us.' For her, a decent job means earning money.

Floor has a Bachelor's degree in social work and is looking for a job. She worries because 'the people from social services' advised her to start with a job that is below her education level, but 'what I've worked for extremely hard, as a single mother, is to get my Bachelor's degree, so I won't give up'. Her notion of a 'good' job is one at her educational level, whereas 'social services' advised her to give up this ambition. Social services expect

economic independence in the sense of paid work without welfare benefits, but Floor is more ambitious.

Young mothers express their agency by defining their dreams and aspirations for employment. It is bounded in the sense of their field of study, educational level and government schemes, as well as their financial situation and mothering responsibilities.

Discussion

The previous sections uncovered structures and norms that shape young mothers' agency in their individual lives. They express that agency when navigating through educational, employment and motherhood norms and structures in their everyday lives. This reflects a conceptualisation of agency as a complex mix of modalities, varying from active resistance to willing adherence to norms and structures (Mahmood 2004; Madhok, Wilson, and Phillips 2013; Rao 2015).

This study shows that adhering to one set of norms can contradict another set of norms. The contradictory discourses of 'success and choice' versus 'crisis and risk' that young mothers navigate as young women (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris 2005; Baker 2010) are complicated further by specific expectations and norms about motherhood and youth. Agency in the sense of adherence to a motherhood ideology is expressed in the example of Eveline, who is a full-time child carer and is financially supported by her husband. This contradicts the norm of completing the highest level of education and finding a good job. Agency in the form of resisting motherhood norms is illustrated by Bianca, who has downgraded her educational level, set up a business and started working full-time, which feeds into the economic independence discourse.

Moreover, within one normative context, such as motherhood, norms are contradictory. Floor wants to be a role model to her daughter, which is expected of her from a motherhood perspective. However, this is 'bad' from a motherhood ideal, because working and earning wages means she cannot take care of her child herself all day. Young mothers' agency not only lies in either resisting or adhering to norms, but also in shifting and considering which norm they adhere to in which context and structure, and which norm they ignore. This modality of agency when considering options is illustrated by young mothers like Sabine, who calls in sick to school when her daughter is ill, or Laurie, who decides not to start school because she fears getting into debt from student loans. This illustrates their 'everyday agency' (Bordonaro 2012; Payne 2012) that is rooted in their individual experiences and practices, and that is always 'bounded' (Evans 2007; Aaltonen 2013) normatively and structurally.

Our analysis shows that young mothers' everyday experiences differ from social policy expectations. A 'good' job in the context of economic independence norms requires higher education leading to high wages in the future, but a 'good' job in the context of mothering norms requires earning money to provide for your children and be able to enjoy them. Young mothers have their own meanings and values of economic self-reliance, similar to those found by Stapleton (2010), Duncan (2007) and Yardley (2008).

We emphasise that young mothers' realities differ from the mindsets of policymakers; this builds on the claim of Finlay et al. (2010) that youth policymakers are mistaken when they describe young people as having low aspirations. We found that young mothers do have educational and employment ambitions besides their mothering aspirations. This

might make them even more driven and ambitious than many young people without children. Therefore, we argue that a policy push towards economic independence does not work for young people, especially not for young women with children (see also SmithBattle (2000) and Phillips (2010)). They navigate their way out of the discourses of 'success and choice' versus 'crisis and risk' through their motherhood.

Educational and employment structures employ common pathways that do not sufficiently consider young mothers' needs and experiences. We found the opposite of what research on transitions in the lives of vulnerable young people shows. Munford and Sanders (2015, 618) find that young people who are disengaged from the education system do not 'follow 'normative' developmental pathways' of graduation to employment to independent living. Young mothers in our study, however, often cannot engage due to structural barriers. Particularly for young mothers, 'disengagement' or 'diversion' from common pathways comes from an engagement with motherhood and a strong commitment to childcare, and from an institutional lack of accommodation for this motherhood.

This research demonstrates that educational structures intended to enhance young people's educational attainment tend to exclude young mothers and lead them away from higher education or work. Work experience trajectories are incentives to start vocational-level studies rather than pursue higher education that could help them develop economic independence.

In fact, being a young working mother amplifies issues encountered by all working mothers. Young mothers often resort to low-paid 'women's jobs' through the interconnected educational and work structures that highlight job security and 'real' work experience instead of internships. Moreover, they often have parents who still work and cannot rely on childcare centres, because of costs and irregular work shifts. Student loans induce fear of debts and exclude practical vocational studies that attract young mothers, because of the job security and wages. Schools do not expect and are unable to accommodate student mothers. Maternity leave is not structurally possible or supported at schools.

Consequently, these structural hindrances 'disengage' young mothers. Policies, however, often downplay structural issues and place the blame for deviancy and disengagement on the young people themselves (Finlay et al. 2010). The finding that these structures can have negative socioeconomic consequences concurs with the conclusion of Shoveller et al. (2011) that policies and programmes have unintended negative social and health consequences for young mothers and their children. This article illustrates how policies and structures can even become counterproductive.

Conclusion

This article shows that educational and employment structures inadequately support young mothers who strive for economic independence while simultaneously caring for their children. Furthermore, it demonstrates their agency and challenges an image of them as vulnerable and unambitious youngsters. Young mothers' agency is rooted in their everyday experiences and practices as mothers, students and employees, and is bounded by a dominant motherhood ideology, expectations of economic independence in terms of earning wages, as well as educational and employment systems and policies. Being a young mother challenges such norms and structures.

Moreover, these structures and conflicting norms 'disengage' young mothers from education and employment. This article shows a need to address structural and normative issues instead of focusing mainly on individual problems of young mothers. An understanding of young mothers' own perceptions and experiences of school and work is critical to a deeper understanding of how their agency manifests in navigating institutional structures and norms on mothering and economic independence. Young mothers who are working and studying should not have to face hindrances to their mothering practices and/or economic independence.

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