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Maternity Leave as Upskilling: A Danish (Neoliberal) Feminist Movement on LinkedIn?

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ABSTRACT

In Denmark, parental leave in relation to childbirth has long been a political hot topic. This study adds a new perspective to this issue by examining a newly emergent LinkedIn discourse which we call “maternity leave as upskilling.” It presents maternity leave as an opportunity to strengthen women’s professional competences. Denmark has seen no noteworthy organic balancing of available leave days between parents, and Danish politicians have long been reluctant to implement earmarked paternity leave. The “upskilling” discourse may therefore constitute a way for working mothers to challenge the hitherto dominant “maternity leave as a gap in the CV” view by aiming to revalue care work as professionally relevant by engaging “neoliberal feminist” language of self-optimization and the capitalization off of personal relationships—here childcare. The women’s use of LinkedIn fits neatly with neoliberal feminism’s individualization of the “feminist” agenda. This way, the “upskilling” discourse simultaneously transcends the private-public divide, by introducing market metrics, entrepreneurialism, and managerialist lingo into care work, and rearticulates it anew because, through the supposed uniqueness of the skills achieved during maternity leave, motherhood becomes required for women’s career success.

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1. Introduction

Denmark is amongst the countries in the world that provide the most weeks of parental leave in relation to childbirth. While proclaimed a “flexible” leave scheme by Danish politicians, allowing the free distribution of leave days between parents, in practice, Danish mothers have taken around 90% of the leave (Hohnen, 2020; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021). This highly skewed distribution has been widely debated in politics and amongst feminists. The issue is complex; while Danes are highly supportive of fathers taking childcare leave, research also finds that opposition to earmarked paternity leave has generally framed such policy as unwanted interference with the autonomy of individual families (Borchorst, 2006).

Scholars have highlighted the aggregate reduced life earnings and missed career opportunities for women, known as the “motherhood penalty”, which result from the unequal distribution of care work (Kleven et al., 2018). In Denmark, a common way of articulating (and justifying) the motherhood penalty is by highlighting the absence from the workplace and a presumed “gap in

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the CV” that long maternity leaves produce. This articulation of maternity leave entrenches the culturally imagined separation of the domestic and professional spheres widely critiqued by feminists (Hoffman, 2001). Given their high labour-market presence as well as continued role as primary caretakers in heterosexual families, Danish women have faced pressures that are often perceived as irreconcilable. With limited political will to disrupt the long-existing distribution of un/paid work, in addition to widespread postfeminist myths concerning the progressiveness of Danish gender equality (Utoft, 2020), Danish working mothers may have had to take matters into their own hands.

In this paper, we observe the emergence of a new discourse that may be an expression of Danish working mothers’ attempts to navigate these incompatible pressures; namely, professional careers, social expectations around motherhood and maternity leave, and the threat of a possible “motherhood penalty.” In a postfeminist context, in which feminist movements are often regarded “too radical” or obsolete (Lewis & Simpson, 2017), women may need to find other ways of challenging gender disparities from below in ways perceived as palatable. We zoom in on a discourse which has gradually gained ground on the professional social media LinkedIn. LinkedIn has existed since 2003 and is, according to the platform itself, the “world’s largest professional network” with more than 950 million users worldwide (LinkedIn, n.d.). LinkedIn is often used for job hunting and recruitment purposes, as it allows hiring organizations to peruse information about candidates; directly through their listed CVs and indirectly through posted content which often showcases their job skills, accomplishments, and values (McChesney & Foster, 2023). It is in this light, namely recruitment and skills showcasing goals, that the examined discourse, which we turn to next, must be understood.

In posts (most of them including pictures), headlines and CV entries, Danish, female LinkedIn users proudly “show their maternity leaves”¹ and, this way, challenge the prevalent assumption that childcare leave has no relevance to the world of work. They argue that through leave, parents learn many new skills that are professionally valuable. We label this new discourse “maternity leave as upskilling” – or simply, the “upskilling” discourse. “Upskilling” refers to how leave is believed to ensure new competences that mothers would not otherwise have obtained, who are, thus, assumed to become more attractive to employers. While some men also use the “upskilling” discourse, it is among professional mothers on LinkedIn that the practice of “showing one’s maternity leave” has become especially widespread. We therefore limit our focus to women and use the term “maternity leave” for clarity.

We have observed the increasing uptake of the “upskilling” discourse and the practice of “showing one’s maternity leave” on LinkedIn. Undertaking “feminist critical discourse analysis” (Lazar, 2007), we qualitatively explore empirical material manually collected from LinkedIn, examining the skills that are highlighted as achieved through leave. Furthermore, using especially Catherine Rottenberg’s work on “neoliberal feminism” (2018, 2019), we discuss the context of the emergence of the “upskilling” discourse; what was the need for such a discourse, what purposes does it serve and what are its implications online and beyond? However, principally, we are interested in unravelling the relationship between the “upskilling” discourse and feminism; Can this discourse and its associated social media practices be understood as feminist—and, if so, feminist in which sense?

2. The Danish Context

In Denmark, only ten percent of the total parental leave days are taken by fathers (Hohnen, 2020). The literature identifies several possible barriers, such as, traditional gender roles and the fact that fathers have had to individually negotiate taking leave with their workplaces (Bloksgaard, 2014). During recent decades, political proposals concerning “earmarked paternity leave” have faced strong opposition from both men, women and politicians (Borchorst, 2006), who have framed it as an infringement of the families’ freedom of choice. Danish women’s opposition to earmarked paternity leave stems from mothers’ seeing leave as their right. Thus, earmarked leave would require women to concede part of something they feel entitled to (Steffensen et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, women face adverse consequences from maternity leave known as the “motherhood penalty.” Women endure reduced wages, missing out on promotions and professional development, from having kids, and going part-time while the children are young retains them in a disadvantaged position. The same picture is evident for Danish mothers (Kleven et al., 2018). Until recently, the most common way of articulating women’s absence from work due to maternity leave was as a “gap in the CV,” that is, a disruption to a preferred continuous career trajectory. This discourse manifests on for example the websites of Danish unemployment insurance funds, labour unions, and online job portal (e.g. Blankholm, 2011; Jobfinder.dk, 2016). The “gap” discourse sets up a conflict between maternity leave and work by describing leave as “a challenge to your CV you need to handle”, “a dilemma”, or “gaps” in the CV as something to avoid (Blankholm, 2011; jobfinder.dk, 2016). This view of maternity leave reads as common sense and the idea of “gaps in the CV” is unquestioned. We argue that the “maternity leave as upskilling” discourse has emerged in response to the “gap” discourse.

From 2 August 2022, an EU directive requiring the earmarking of leave for fathers took effect in Denmark. Thus, together, Danish parents have a right to 48 weeks of parental leave, and now, eleven of these belong to the father (or co-parent) (Ministry of Employment, 2022). As the enactment of this policy is still recent, any preliminary results of its effect are associated with much uncertainty (Soelberg, 2023). Therefore, this paper’s focus is retrospective. We study the emergence of the discursive reframing of maternity leave from a “gap in the CV” to “upskilling” in a context without political will to change Danish parental norms, which has been the status quo for at least 20 years (Borchorst, 2006; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Neoliberal Feminism

Catherine Rottenberg (2014) coined the term “neoliberal feminism” which describes a rising form of feminism that centres neoliberal rationality. The neoliberal feminist acknowledges gender inequality while at the same time disavowing the cultural and socioeconomic structures shaping inequality and injustice (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). In neoliberalism,² everything is understood and valued in market metrics. Hence, the neoliberal feminist subject is a capital-enhancing and entrepreneurial agent undertaking constant cost-benefit analyses (Rottenberg, 2018, 2019). When disavowing structural forces, the struggle for equality can only be understood in individualistic terms. The neoliberal feminist accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and therefore seeks to optimize herself and her resources innovatively (Rottenberg, 2018, 2019).

Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad also address the neoliberalization and individualization of feminism (Gill & Orgad, 2017). With the term “confidence culture,” they critique mainstream discourses on women’s presumed lack of confidence as the main barrier to their own happiness and success. Gill and Orgad (2018) further highlight “resilience” as a central related logic, which promotes women’s capacity to handle tough life situations and “bounce back” through self-management and a positive mental attitude. By encouraging women to change their bodies and psyches, neoliberal feminism, confidence and resilience may be understood as governmentality (Rottenberg, 2018). Governmentality refers to how power is present everywhere, produces subjects and entails internalization of, for instance, gendered norms (Lazar, 2007). Neoliberal governmentality teaches women to think about their life choices from a self-investment perspective turning them into individual enterprises (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2019). It follows, then, that if women make smart decisions and investments in the present, be that in relationships, careers or hobbies, they will enhance their returns and value in the future (Rottenberg, 2019). Clearly, neoliberal feminism implies a class bias. The ideal neoliberal feminist subjects are middle-class women, because they have the (psychological and economic) resources to plan and make choices

with a view to maximize future returns, and to adopt the confidence and resilience that, it is assumed, being a successful modern working mother demands (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

3.2. *Happy Motherhood*

According to Rottenberg (2018), what distinguishes neoliberal feminism is that it presents work-family balance as a progressive feminist ideal. A “happy work-family balance” concerns women’s ability to balance a successful career with having children (Rottenberg, 2018, 2019). Whereas Second Wave, liberal feminism sought to free (middle-class, White) women from the imperative of childrearing, through the ideal of work-family balance, neoliberal feminism retains motherhood in women’s normative life trajectory.

The neoliberal cost/benefit calculus centres investments and outcomes, through which even mothering’s most challenging sides are glossed over as potential assets for women, such as, the drudgery of constant diaper changes, cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. After giving birth, women may further have to deal with a number of health issues such as healing after ruptures or postpartum depression, not to mention the social pressures to “get their bodies back”—that is, lose the weight gained during pregnancy (Neiterman & Fox, 2017). Even in contexts where fathers are politically encouraged to participate in infant care, such as Iceland, women still face a gender ideology that equates parenting with (intensive) mothering, for example, through the naturalization of breastfeeding—a practice that, for many, is troublesome and a cause of feeling insufficient as mothers (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018). Finally, as we have argued, the “motherhood penalty” remains a prevalent problem of which women are aware. Ladekarl et al. (2022) show that first-time pregnant Danish women worry about the potential adverse career consequences of maternity leave, but seemingly take missed job and promotion opportunities for granted as inevitable and therefore do not complain.

Such uncomplaining motherhood resonates with Sara Ahmed’s (2010) notion of “required happiness” which stresses how oppressed people (e.g. women) are expected to smile and be happy despite injustice. Ahmed (2010) argues that women, especially feminists and Black women, are read as angry, even hostile, if signs of happiness are absent, which is why feminisms opposing gendered and racialized power structures are considered “excessive” and unpalatable (Lewis & Simpson, 2017). Instead, women are expected to move on from feelings of anger and bitterness and should instead channel confidence and resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Hereby, neoliberal feminism interpellates women as happy, calm and uncomplaining subjects rendering them largely unthreatening to neoliberalism and patriarchy (Gill & Orgad, 2017).

3.3. *Popular Feminisms and Motherhood Online*

Utoft (2020) argues that Denmark may be understood as a “postfeminist gender regime” which stresses the widespread belief that gender equality is achieved. A context where gender inequality is perceived as a problem of the past generally only allows for certain kinds of “feminism.” In the postfeminist gender regime, women’s presumed ability to freely choose whether to pursue a career, become a homemaker, or to combine motherhood and work, is viewed as evidence of their liberation (Lewis & Simpson, 2017). It is this focus on the individual that makes clear the link of such “choice feminism” with neoliberalism.

Neoliberal individualization and profit motives are also detectable in other “popular feminisms” (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Self-help books are, for instance, heralded by marketers as “feminist manifestos” as they aim to empower women to become their “best selves,” personally and professionally—perhaps most famously Sheryl Sandberg’s “*Lean in*” from 2013. Alongside businesswomen—turned—self-help authors, many celebrities have professed themselves feminists, including Emma Watson and Barack Obama, serving as a source of positive branding (Rivers, 2017). Scholars cautiously celebrate celebrity feminism. Although it may encourage fans to (critically) engage with feminism, its wide uptake simultaneously makes evident its harmlessness (Hobson, 2016).

Ahmed (2017) contends that we learn about feminism’s implications by the bother it causes, and other “popular feminisms” have certainly created more bother, such as “hashtag feminism” (Dixon, 2014). Most crucially the #MeToo movement was targeted systemic sexism and sexual harassment and was, therefore, widely considered excessive(ly *angry*). However, not only feminism has moved online, so too have women’s performances of motherhood. In the early days of the internet, so-called “mommy blogs,” for instance, gave mothers a voice to narrate their own experiences in response to feelings of isolation and in opposition to motherhood ideals promoted by media and experts (Lehto, 2020). Later, Facebook and especially Instagram made performing motherhood online increasingly easy by facilitating a shift away from long blog texts to centring flawless, filtered images. It is this ease of posting that makes DeGroot and Vik (2021) claim that sharing family-related pictures online is now such an ingrained aspect of motherhood, that if a mother does not, whether she is then a “good mother” may be socially questioned.

4. Methodology

4.1. Empirical Material

The data collection happened in the spring of 2022 on LinkedIn. The empirical material includes three types of LinkedIn content: Posts (some including photos), headlines, and CV entries. First, we collected the posts manually using the platform’s search function. The key search word and hashtag used was #barsel; the Danish word for parental leave in relation to childbirth. Other search word combinations included “maternity leave, career”, “maternity leave, CV” and “maternity leave, competences” (all in Danish). LinkedIn’s search engine and algorithm shaped the resulting posts by presenting mainly new posts, posts that included pictures, and posts with a high number of likes, shares, and comments. Importantly, the comment tracks of the collected posts are not included in the empirical material. We assessed the relevance of the posts generated by the search by identifying at least one of the following three themes:

1. Maternity leave as upskilling
2. Baby as new boss
Baby as project
3. Maternity leave as gap in CV
Worries about adverse effects of maternity leave on career

During more than a year, we observed the emergence of the “upskilling” discourse in the capacity of private LinkedIn users, which led us to initiate this research. Therefore, the first and second themes above were identified prior to the data collection, whereas the latter third theme emerged in the subsequent analysis of the collected material (see below). In the *Analysis*, we collapse the “baby as new boss” and “baby as project” as one theme, because their underlying logics are related, and they will therefore also be interpreted together, under one subheading. The same applies to theme three.

The second source of material we included concerns what LinkedIn calls a profile’s “headline”; the short text that features immediately below the name of a user and typically includes the person’s current job status (e.g. “Consultant at Accenture”) or areas of expertise (e.g. “Recruitment and talent management”). The headline may also show that someone is looking for a job or is on parental leave. Third, some women include maternity leave as a job in their LinkedIn CVs by adding it under the “Experience” tab and here writing the skills achieved during maternity leave. We manually collected examples of maternity leave in the CV via sites on LinkedIn called “*Barsel*” and “*På barsel*” ((On) maternity leave), and “*Barsel & Karriere*” (Maternity leave & Career). These sites are registered as companies or workplaces on LinkedIn in the same way as, for example, LEGO or Novo Nordisk. We incorporate the profile headlines and CV entries in our analysis as examples of the various discursive practices undertaken by women professionals related to the “upskilling” discourse.

The main limitation to our manual approach is that the collected material may not present a comprehensive, but rather a selective, picture of the “upskilling” discourse, including who performs it and what that looks like. This entails the risk that there can exist nuances that we are not able to capture. However, we see this as less of a problem because our analytical goal was depth, not breadth. Thus, throughout the data collection process, we continuously assessed the “thickness” of the descriptions which the material enabled, in order to judge when empirical saturation was achieved (Kozinets, 2018). In total, our material includes 24 LinkedIn posts, published in 2021 and 2022, and 13 headlines and CV entries. This material represents information from 37 different women’s profiles. 20 of the 24 sampled LinkedIn posts included photos.

Since using direct quotes from public social-media posts enable immediate identification through a simple Google search, we present the *Analysis* at a general level by narratively unfolding the identified themes using only illustrative snippets of the original posts (Whiting & Pritchard, 2017). To further strengthen anonymity of the sampled LinkedIn users, the included snippets have been translated from Danish into English.

4.2. Coding and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

We carried out the analysis in two phases, the first of which was data driven and will be elaborated below in the *Analysis*, whereas the second was theory guided and will be unfolded in the *Discussion*.

As previously described, we ventured into doing this research having already identified the first two themes, namely 1. Maternity leave as upskilling, and 2. Baby as new boss and baby as project. Therefore, using the software NVivo, we first coded the material with these themes in mind while remaining open to new themes based on the question: What other things do the women write about? This led to the identification of the third theme 3. Maternity leave as a gap in CV and worries about adverse effects of maternity leave on careers. We used a combination of “in vivo” and descriptive codes, that is, the sampled women’s own words and nouns (assigned by us) that summarise the meaning of a piece of data respectively (Saldaña, 2014). This means that in the first analytical phase, the text was in focus which, in turn, means that the collected photos are not addressed in the *Analysis*.

The goal of the second phase, conversely, was to go below the textual surface level of the material. The second analytical phase was therefore inspired by Lazar’s (2005, 2007) “feminist critical discourse analysis” (henceforth feminist CDA) which aims to examine how “ideology and gendered relations of power get (re)produced, negotiated, and contested in representations of social practices, in social relationships between people, and in people’s social and personal identities in texts and talk” (Lazar, 2007, p. 150). This way, feminist CDA aligns itself particularly well with our purpose of critically exploring the underlying logics of the “upskilling” discourse. As feminist CDA uses “contextualized instances of spoken and written language” as well as images as its data (Lazar, 2007, p. 151), we discuss the collected photos in this part.

Since the “imbrication of power and ideology in discourse is sometimes not apparent to the participants involved in particular social practices”, according to Lazar (2007), researchers must mobilize “theory in order to create critical awareness” (p. 145). As such, we used our theoretical framework (incl. Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018) in our exploration of the emergence of the “upskilling” discourse, its functions and implications, but most importantly, its relationship with feminism, which the *Discussion* presents.

5. Analysis

5.1. Maternity Leave as Upskilling

Skills figure in 20 of the 24 LinkedIn posts in which the women write that, on maternity leave, they will experience “personal growth”, achieve “new life skills” and become stronger than before. Some posts are written before maternity leave about the expectation of new skills, others are written after

leave about the skills achieved. The emphasized skills include adaptability, multitasking, a positive mindset, effectiveness, productivity, planning, ability to work under pressure, learning to be solution-oriented, and creating an overview in chaos. Other skills emphasized are empathy, knowing your own patterns of reaction, endurance, and communication.

Some women describe maternity leave as a “personal development course” or a “project management course.” One woman writes: “At this course, I learned to be better at prioritizing, planning, conflict management, handling interruptions and a lot more. Many would maybe call it maternity leave.” Thus, it only becomes clear by the end that she is writing about having a baby. One LinkedIn user describes maternity leave as “tough project management” which requires “clear-cut prioritizing, adaptability, and the ability to make quick decisions.” Another woman argues that she returns to her job with a more comprehensive CV and highlights the ability “to keep a cool head in stressful situations” and “to think outside the box to find creative solutions for urgent problems.”

While the posts are one way to “show your maternity leave,” the headlines and the inclusion of maternity leave in LinkedIn CVs are another. Examples of the (job) titles in the women’s profile headlines are “Maternity leave,” “Mother with a capital M,” and “Maternity leave: My most competence-giving project management training.” These job titles are combined with mentioning their “workplace” as “On maternity leave,” “Maternity leave & Career” and “Maternity leave fulltime,” which is also immediately visible at the top of a profile. Other women add maternity leave as experience in their LinkedIn CVs and use the profile headline for the title of their paid jobs. The profiles which include maternity leave in the LinkedIn CV mention similar skills: “organizing,” “varying working hours,” “event planning,” “networking,” “customer care” and “multitasking.” This way, the “upskilling” discourse seeks to make maternity leave, usually perceived as domestic and unrelated with work, professionally relevant. Finally, the skills are described as “something you can’t read in a book” which shows an assumed uniqueness of childcare leaves in relation to skills attainment, and presents maternity leave as a hitherto overlooked source of value for employers.

5.2. *Baby as the New Boss and Baby as a Project*

Another theme within the “upskilling” discourse concerns how some women write about their babies as their new bosses; “The mini boss 2.0.” This theme figures mainly in the posts, and we identified it in 8 of the 24 posts. Here, many start with an exclamation like “New job!,” “I’m getting a new boss” or “Say hello to my new boss.” In the posts, the baby is subsequently described as a (“little bald”) boss who will challenge the women (some call themselves employees) night and day, who is demanding, even unreasonable, and who is in charge of the promotion of the women, who now bear the (job)title “mom.”

Some women only mention—as if in passing—that their posts concern maternity leave. One LinkedIn user writes:

Over a short period of time, I have developed some new and different skills with which my boss seems to be very happy. The days start early and end very late. As part of my education, I use my communication skills extensively, and this is necessary for communication with colleagues (father, family, and friends) about tasks and events. A lot is happening in this skills development course—or what others would call maternity leave.

A similar theme in the “upskilling” discourse presents the baby as a *project*. Four of the posts explicitly use this description. They call their maternity leave “project new baby,” “project baby” or “The project: a little boy. Expected ‘termination’ in May.” These “projects” are described as “the biggest project of my life,” as a “personal project,” or a “highly important project,” and as something that requires strict project management. The “baby as new boss” and “baby as project” themes both make use of figurative language and terms which we primarily use in the context of careers, all of which is presented with an appropriate humorous edge.

5.3. Opposition to Maternity Leave as a Gap in the CV and Worries About Adverse Effects on Career

The understanding of maternity leave as “a gap in the CV” appears in seven of the 24 sampled posts. One user unfolds this understanding as follows:

Unfortunately, a lot of people see maternity leave as a gap in the CV. I did too before I went on leave. A period in which one is in a kind of stagnant state career- and competence-wise. A waiting period that one should quickly get through to get back to work and pick up the job where you left it.

The seven posts mention the “gap” understanding as one with which the writers disagree. They express disappointment and instead reframe maternity leave as upskilling. One LinkedIn user feels that “it’s not fair” to see absence from work due to leave as a gap and describes how she is “mildly annoyed” that maternity leave—“in today’s Denmark” – is not seen as “a personal development year.” Another user received the advice from a job consultant to “completely hush up” her maternity leave on her CV and at job interviews. This woman questions whether it can really be true that “employers see maternity leave and family life as a weakness.” In both examples, the women are seemingly surprised at the continued existence of patriarchal societal structures and sexism concerning women’s roles.

Only two sampled posts include reflections about the possibility of adverse implications of the “gap” view of maternity leave. For one woman, going on leave sparked worries about her “career, opportunities and future ambitions,” but these worries are immediately turned from outwardly-directed to inwards, because she is “determined to see and live [maternity leave] differently.” Another woman ponders whether she will struggle to get a job having taken maternity leave immediately after graduating from university: “Maybe it will be challenging to be considered [for jobs], maybe not at all.” So to her, it seems equally probable that “a gap in the CV” may be a hindrance in her access to work and no hindrance whatsoever.

6. Discussion

Since Denmark has seen no noteworthy balancing of available parental leave weeks, despite these being freely distributable between parents, and Danish politicians having long been reluctant to intervene (Borchorst, 2006; Hohnen, 2020; Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2021), we argue that the “upskilling” discourse has emerged. The “upskilling” discourse challenges prevalent perceptions of maternity leave as “a gap in the CV” as a contributing factor to and justification of “the motherhood penalty.” This challenge happens in ways compatible with widespread postfeminist myths which we see in the lack of reference to systemic inequalities. The challenge implied by the “upskilling” discourse incorporates neoliberalism by framing caring for a baby as personal and professional development, thus, attempting to legitimize unpaid labour in the professional arena for those who continue to take the brunt of childcare leave and suffer the consequences.

6.1. “Upskilling” Compared with Other (Feminist) Social Media Practices

We must also understand the emergence of the “upskilling” discourse in the context of a significant tradition of women performing motherhood online (DeGroot & Vik, 2021; Lehto, 2020) and the rise of “hashtag feminism” (Dixon, 2014). Even without a designated hashtag, we observed how the practice of “showing one’s maternity leave” has spread on LinkedIn. These posts frequently appear in our feeds and tend to garner many likes and comments. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that, for popular feminisms, visibility becomes the politics, not a route to politics. While this logic also seems to underpin the “upskilling” discourse, it is different from, for instance, #EverydaySexism or #MeToo through which women share past experiences of sexism and sexual harassment. Being forward-looking, “upskilling” instead concerns an attempt to culturally reframe maternity leave for

the future. Following traditions of feminist practice as world-making and through the performative power of language (e.g. Ahmed, 2017), we might argue that by articulating childcare-related skills as professionally relevant, they become so. However, we cannot know the motives of these women. They may agree that there is a need for reframing perceptions of maternity leave. We see this in the posts that express opposition to the “gap” discourse, but whether they are intentionally posting to promote this view (i.e. the need for reframing) is unclear since the posts are about the women themselves. In a critical reading, this may even suggest that the women are merely copying a trend, maybe having seen the positive response that these posts get, because feminist messages can serve as a source of personal branding (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Rivers, 2017). The branding-interpretation is supported by the photos included in the posts. Of our sample of 24 LinkedIn posts, 20 were accompanied by photos, 16 of which show explicit positive feelings. This finding mirrors Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz’s (2018) conclusion that women’s pictures on LinkedIn are more likely to signal emotion, whereas men’s signal status (although they study portraits, not posted pictures). The women in the photos in our sample are smiling and looking beautiful, often visibly styled, and the babies look cute, calm and happy. The photos suggest harmony, a surplus of mental resources, which produces “momfluencer” associations (Petersen, 2023). Instagram “momfluencers” present idealized portrayals of motherhood that omit the challenging realities of childcare (incl., drudgery and depression) as a means of attracting followers (DeGroot & Vik, 2021). The women further demonstrate resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018) whereby they not only perform ideal femininity but “ideal worker” par excellence to potential employers who are looking to recruit using LinkedIn (McChesney & Foster, 2023).

The writing style of “upskilling” is also seemingly less typical of LinkedIn content than, for example, Instagram. The posts are informal and sprinkled with emojis, which are used to emphasize their humour or, more specifically, irony. Humour and satire have always been part of feminist political work (Fahs, 2019). In such a reading, the posts might be a scathing mockery, satirical mockery of neoliberalism or patriarchy, however, this is unlikely. In our data, irony rather serves to soften criticism and protect the writers by making them appear less angry. The use of irony thus becomes a distinctly postfeminist practice through which critical commentary is “tempered” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Such tempering suggests expert attunement to the intended audiences in terms of how professional self-branding is appropriately performed (in gendered ways) specifically on LinkedIn (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018), but also the Danish postfeminist commonsense (Utoft, 2020). We may argue, then, that the skills that these posts show are not the ones that the women write about, but creativity, remarkable communication skills and the capacity (and tenacity, in true neoliberal spirit) to brand themselves through any means available.

6.2. “Upskilling” *Vis-à-Vis* Neoliberal Feminism

As discussed above, the feminist change motives of the sampled women are unclear. However, this does not preclude that the “upskilling” discourse may be interpreted as an example of neoliberal feminism. First, the hyper-individualization and promotion of “self-optimisation” implied by the “upskilling” discourse echo “lean in” logics. However, whereas Sheryl Sandberg (2013) urged women to lean into leadership roles, “upskilling” encourages women to lean into motherhood, assuming that doing so will subsequently ensure professional success. This resonates with the idea of future payoffs of present investments (Rottenberg, 2018). Second, while “upskilling” does not explicitly advocate for women’s empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2017, 2018) as a solution to the “motherhood penalty,” the self-branding achieved through the LinkedIn posts certainly projects empowerment and confidence. Third, Rottenberg (2018) argues that neoliberal feminists generally recognize the existence of gender disparities, but that these are paid minimal attention. Similarly in our material, seven posts question the “maternity leave as a gap in the CV” discourse, whereas any further reflection about its implications only appears in two. Fourth, neoliberal feminism advocates incessant self-optimization and entrepreneurialism as the solution

to gender inequality, which may help us understand the emergence of “baby as a project” or being on leave as “a personal development course” language. Rottenberg (2018, 2019) succinctly shows how neoliberal feminism collapses the public-private divide by transferring market metrics and entrepreneurialism into the home. “Upskilling” makes this transferral very explicit through its articulation of childcare in managerialist lingo.

Rottenberg (2018, 2019) further raises concern about the introduction of cost-benefit calculi into care and intimate relationships to show how work-family balance (i.e. “outsourcing” all tedious household chores which leaves mothers free to enjoy only harmonious quality time with their children) is only available to the most privileged women. The cost-benefit calculus plays out differently in the “upskilling” discourse, where it, rather than emphasizing quality time with the baby, advocates for the maximization and capitalization off of care work with an express outcome focus, namely, the professional gains. The baby, in other words, becomes a means to achieving this. In a more generous reading, we may concede that the “upskilling” discourse questions the devaluation of feminine-typed tasks (Ronen, 2018), namely care work, and tries to “re-value” them as professionally relevant but does so on the market’s terms—symbolically and linguistically.

Another point that supports our reading of the “upskilling” discourse as a manifestation of neoliberal feminism, relates to Rottenberg’s (2018) claim that by having instilled work-family balance as a feminist goal, neoliberal feminism reinscribes motherhood as a mandated aspect of women’s lives. To have work-family balance, you must have a family and, here, only kids count as such. The “upskilling” discourse cements the reinscription of motherhood into women’s lives by presenting the skills achieved through maternity leave as unique. Accepting this uniqueness implies that women must have children and go on maternity leave to achieve the skills needed for professional success. However, accepting the uniqueness of the skills achieved through maternity leave, we might wonder where that leaves childfree women in their careers? And if the skills are specific to mothering, will fathers not “upskill” in the same way if they go on leave?

6.3. “Upskilling”—A Feminist Movement?

Lastly, we turn to the question of whether the “upskilling” discourse and its associated social media practices may be understood as feminist—and if so, feminist in which sense? As our analysis does not intend to judge individuals, we have offered both generous and critical interpretations. Even practices which we may not agree with may constitute important feminist projects (Utoft, 2020), but the women in our sample may, shaped by postfeminism, indeed reject any feminist intentions that we may concede to offer. To answer the question, then, we must necessarily venture into normative territory because it concerns what at a minimum characterizes feminism. Feminist scholars tend to agree on the following key features: The recognition of systemic sexism and misogyny, affect, solidarity, and political action such as collective mobilization (e.g. Littler & Rottenberg, 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). These scholars agree that “naming inequalities” is a necessary precursor for feminism (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019, p. 28), however, the women in our sample do not. In Whelehan’s words (2010), the sampled women express “broadly feminist sentiments” which “have become severed” from their feminist political and philosophical origins (p. 156). Although a few express what Hemmings (2012) calls “affective dissonance”, that is, perceived discrepancies between one’s “self-narration and social reality” (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021, p. 866), this does not lead to an expressed wish for systemic change. Rather, the change they envision is of themselves. Hemmings (2012) stresses that affects such as rage and frustration are crucial drivers of feminism but, as we have shown, rage is absent from the material, whereas happiness and harmony are projected.

Often, it is the disclosure of stories and testimonies about experienced injustices (such as the #MeToo movement) that, through a recognition of shared struggles and mutual empathy, produces feminist solidarity (Littler & Rottenberg, 2021; Vachhani & Pullen, 2019). In our material, instead, output is in focus, gendered struggles are left implicit, and the individual takes centerstage. Finally, the women express no “desire for connection” (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019, p. 29), and there is no call

to action. Seen in this light, we can reject the question in our title: The “upskilling” discourse is not a (feminist) movement. It may better be understood as a social media trend the underlying logics of which may helpfully be surfaced using the lens of neoliberal feminism.

LinkedIn is not simply a neutral medium into which the “upskilling” discourse is typed. The discourse is enabled and shaped by the affordances of the LinkedIn platform regarding who gets to enact it, and we find an overwhelming “white-collar” bias. 24 out of the 37 sampled women have a master’s degree or more, 15 have an education or job that concerns communication broadly (incl., marketing and media), and 12 have leader roles (i.e. job titles such as “CEO”, “strategy manager” and “project leader”). This finding aligns with Brenner et al. (2020) who found that LinkedIn users are more likely to be highly educated and occupy higher level organizational positions. Moreover, most of the sampled women work in the private sector, although most Danish women work in the public sector (Utoft, 2020). This suggests that the “upskilling” discourse may principally be accessible to a subset of Danish women, which, in turn, is shaped by which sectors and professions are more likely to use LinkedIn. Rottenberg (2019) labels neoliberal feminism an “unabashedly exclusionary” feminism (p. 1079) because the emancipation of privileged White women happens at the expense of “disposable women” (p. 1080), to whom domestic labour and care work is outsourced. Despite evident contextual differences, a similar dynamic is at play in Denmark in which public childcare enables women to work. However, traditionally feminine (key welfare) professions, such as nursery teachers, have historically been fixed in a political wage hierarchy that reproduces gender wage gaps in the public sector still today (Sørensen et al., 2022). In Rottenberg’s work (2018, 2019), the othering of “disposable women” happens along racialized lines. We refrain from making interpretations on race and ethnicity based on the limited information we have about our sample (principally, names and pictures), but argue that class is a distinguishing factor in the Danish case. Some women’s careers and economic opportunities, and scope for self-fulfilment, are enabled by other women’s systemically devalued work.

7. Conclusion

For decades, Denmark has had one of the world’s highest female labour-market participation rates, but women remain the primary caregivers for children. Intervention to change traditional gender roles, for example through earmarked paternity leave, has been framed as unwanted interference. Political passivity has therefore contributed to the entrenchment of “the motherhood penalty” and a cultural naturalization of parenting as a feminine domain. In light of these contextual factors, we observed the emergence of the “maternity leave as upskilling” discourse. In this paper, we have explored its functions and implications, but most centrally we aimed to unravel the relationship between this discourse and feminism.

Undertaking feminist critical discourse analysis, we showed how the sampled, women LinkedIn users articulate care work in professional terms, and what skills they highlight as achieved during maternity leave. Our neoliberal feminist (Rottenberg, 2018) reading of the material brings to the fore an inherent marketization and maximization off of intimate relationships. We interpreted the women’s strategic use of humour as a mechanism for rendering their posts less critical (and, thus, feminist) which the included photos, in turn, substantiate by channelling solely happiness and harmony. Positive affects obfuscate the challenges of childcare through which the women’s new skills are believed to be learnt.

“Opposition to maternity leave as a gap in the CV” is the least prominent theme. The reframing of unpaid care work from stagnation of women’s professionalism to a source of upskilling implicitly questions the devaluation of feminine-typed tasks. However, “feminine devaluation” (Ronen, 2018) is not named as part of systemic gender inequality. The “upskilling” discourse instead centres the individual women’s self-optimization which, through idealized motherhood, will presumably guard them against age-old gender hierarchies. Consequently, the private-public divide is at once transcended by the introduction of entrepreneurialism and

managerialist lingo into care work (Rottenberg, 2018), and rearticulated anew because, through the supposed uniqueness of maternal skills, motherhood becomes required for women's career success.

In the discussion, we zoomed out from the empirical themes to contextualize the “upskilling” discourse within performances of other feminisms online. Compared with recent global mobilizations, such as the #MeToo movement, “upskilling” falls short. Like other contemporary popular feminisms, glossing over systemic inequalities and evading anger and critical commentary, the “upskilling” discourse holds little change potential. However, we recognize that this may not be the women's objective. Instead, what enacting “upskilling” achieves is personal and professional branding on LinkedIn. The women self-brand as modern, empowered, and crucially uncomplaining working mothers by showcasing their uncanny strategic communication skills and employability, which “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg, 2018) as our analysis-guiding framework helpfully untangled.

Finally, we must repeat that Denmark is in a state of transition. Given the recent enactment of earmarked paternity leave (August 2022), the distribution of leave days between Danish mothers and fathers will likely change, which may, over time, also affect normative gender roles like in other Nordic countries. In Sweden, with three months of parental leave reserved for each parent since 2016, fathers' share of parental leave has increased gradually over time and reached 30% in 2020 (Duvander & Cedstrand, 2022). Similarly in Iceland, the implementation of a fathers' quota has created cultural change around fathers' involvement in childcare with eight out of ten fathers now using at least three months of parental leave (Duvander et al., 2019).

Thus, if care work gradually becomes the domain of all parents in Denmark, there may no longer be a need for the “upskilling” discourse. Although we have observed some men who have already enacted the “upskilling” discourse on LinkedIn, this tendency may increase as men start taking more leave—a very tentative, preliminary one-year evaluation of the new Danish leave scheme points in that direction (Soelberg, 2023). It is also possible that “upskilling” may replace the “gap” discourse entirely, entering the language and practices of employers, unemployment services and labour unions, which we have already seen an example of—although still confined to the LinkedIn platform. It will be interesting to follow these developments in the future.

Notes

1. The phrase “show your maternity leave on your CV” originates from a LinkedIn article written by Anne Sophie Sehested Münster (2018). Sehested Münster has advocated, also in Danish media, for this practice using the language of “maternity leave as upskilling.”
2. Conceptualized as a form of macro political and economic governance (characterized by deregulation and privatization) that has produced an “organizing ethic of society that shapes the way [people] live, think and feel” (Gill, 2017, p. 608).

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