



# The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood

*Ms. Sharon Hays*

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## **The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood** Ms. Sharon Hays

Working mothers in the late-20th century confront not only conflicting demands on their time and energy but also conflicting ideas about how they are to behave: they must be nurturing and unselfish while engaged in child rearing but competitive and ambitious at work. As more and more women enter the workplace, it would seem reasonable for society to make mothering a simpler and more efficient task. Instead, as Sharon Hays points out in this book, an ideology of "intensive mothering" has developed that only exacerbates the tensions working mothers face. Drawing on ideas about mothering since the Middle Ages, on contemporary child-rearing manuals and on in-depth interviews with mothers from a range of social classes, Hays traces the evolution of the ideology of intensive mothering - an ideology that holds the individual mother primarily responsible for child rearing and dictates that the process is to be child-centred, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive and financially expensive. Hays argues that these ideas about appropriate mothering stem from a fundamental ambivalence about a system based solely on the competitive pursuit of individual interests. In attempting to deal with our deep uneasiness about self-interest, we have imposed unrealistic and unremunerated obligations and commitments on mothering, making it into an opposing force, a primary field on which this cultural ambivalence is played out.

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