

# “COMPULSORY MOTHERHOOD”: THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE BODY AS REGULATED BY THE STATE (BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF NEWSPAPER *SOVETSKAIA BELORUSSIIA*). *Summary*

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In social space, the body is endowed with particular symbolic meanings. It can act as a representation of the self, as a sign of acceptance or rejection of prevailing norms and rules, as well as a marker of belonging to a certain social group. In addition, the body is the main object of techniques of power affecting the individual, her or his acts, practices of perception and thinking. At the same time, it exists within a field of gendered meanings, according to which it is constructed and defined. Various practices of the state result in the imposition of a certain view of gender roles in society, based on and making extensive use of the space of the body.

This topic is particularly important in the Belarusian context, where legislated gender equality and the empowerment of women, on the one hand, and the ideology of motherhood, on the other, come into conflict. The main task of this paper is to identify official discourses dealing with the reproductive female body and the core meanings that these discourses give to it.

Empirical data for the present study is based on articles from *Sovetskaia Belorussia*, the official newspaper of the Presidential Administration.

The study was conducted in two stages. Initially, I selected articles dealing with the female reproductive body. In general, I chose 136 articles published between 1991 and 2010. Then I performed a nonformalized discourse analysis of selected articles. At this stage, my aim was to identify categories and terms used to describe the reproductive female body. I theorize “motherhood” as the ideological center of constructions of the female body. Accordingly, I begin by conceptualizing this notion, basing it both in theoretical debates and in the findings of my empirical research. Analysis of the discourse of motherhood in newspaper articles allows us to explicate a Belarusian regime of “compulsory motherhood” and also to identify those meanings

that are embedded in the concept of “normative motherhood.” These meanings become the measure of the norm, based on which other forms of motherhood and women’s different life trajectories and choices are pathologized.

Theoretically and methodologically this study is based on the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Adrienne Rich. According to these authors, the body is constructed primarily as a “political body,” a space where the state, institutions, and experts apply their knowledge/power, manifested in both disciplining practices (the individual body) and biopolitics (the body of the population). Motherhood is a discursive strategy that makes women’s bodies the object of both disciplining practices and biopolitics. On the one hand, the female body is subjected to disciplinary mechanisms through practices applied directly onto the body, particularly by the medical profession, and, on the other hand, the female body is constructed as the cornerstone of the reproduction of the population. This gives rise to demographic policies that include both disciplinary procedures of manipulation of the female body and the more general regulatory mechanisms aimed at encouraging and facilitating childbirth, protecting the health and wellbeing of women and children, and improving the healthcare system.

In this study, I understand motherhood as a regime that, using stable configurations of public discourses, gives certain meanings to the female body. I prefer to call this regime “compulsory motherhood.”

The study identified two main discourses of the female reproductive body. First, the *family-demographic discourse*, which appears in all the articles since 1993 and is associated with the commencement of an active nation-building process in the country at that time. The current demographic situation in Belarus is described in terms of a threat to the nation’s existence. Through the family-demographic perspective, the female reproductive body is actively used in national discourses that are intended to legislate motherhood as the primary function of women. We can say that the family-demographic discourse actualizes two main themes: the positioning of women in relation to reproduction and motherhood (the need to propagate motherhood and family values), and the social policies aimed at protecting motherhood and childhood. The state has consistently emphasized that social policy regarding maternal and child health is a priority. Therefore, a tacit contract between the woman and the state has emerged, according to which women must carry out their reproductive function and certain responsibilities for the raising and educating the children while the state, which controls this process, in turn assists and supports women, families, and children. This contract gives rise to the “institutionalization” of motherhood, in which different state institutions (government bureaus for maternal and child welfare, medical and educational agencies, etc.) are charged with providing “care” to the female reproductive body and developing the system of state benefits for women.

Second, medical discourse dominates newspaper articles about the female body. Authors often appeal to the opinions of medical professionals. These opinions are not those of ordinary practicing doctors but rather of “medical officials”—that is, of public health professionals who perform both administrative and medical functions.

Thus, the newspaper presents the state's view of the female reproductive body. Female reproductive function is signified as a purely medical phenomenon, not only inscribing women within a medicalized space but also imposing on them the medical manipulation of their bodies. Doctors are given the status of the exclusive experts on the female body, while the woman herself is discursively denied agency over her physical, reproductive being.

It should be noted that my separation of these two discourses is largely analytical, since in practice they are closely connected. Next, I discuss in greater detail the meanings attributed to the female reproductive body. To that end, it is important to describe the regime of "compulsory motherhood" and then to identify the meanings embedded in the concept of "normal" motherhood.

The female reproductive body is described in terms of "compulsory motherhood." This means that every female body ought—or at least ought to seek—to fulfill their reproductive function, which includes not only childbirth, but the upbringing of children, as well as care for the family as a whole. This construction of the female body is manifested, for example, in discussions about abortion, contraception, infertility, and new reproductive technologies. In post-Soviet Belarus abortion has always been allowed, but official rhetoric frames it in extremely negative terms. Likewise, the issues of contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases are viewed through the prism of "healthy reproduction." In other words, the state's logic is as follows: caring for women's health is necessary so that they can later give birth to healthy children. Contraception is acceptable only if the woman does eventually procreate. The newspaper articles also actively discuss the "social" causes of infertility such as women's "wrong" behavior (promiscuous sex before marriage, abortion, unhealthy habits, etc.). Female infertility is viewed as a moral issue. The use of such categories and of reproachful discourses reduces woman's value to her ability to bear children. Accordingly, the new reproductive technologies are promoted as ways of overcoming infertility. If at first, in the 1990s, the newspaper largely condemned new reproductive technologies, gradually it changed its position to view these new technologies as designed to help women fulfill their primary "life purpose." They are a means of realizing female reproductive function regardless of individual physiological condition.

It is also important to analyze not only the processes of normalization but of the pathologization of certain phenomena, for example women voluntarily foregoing motherhood. For instance, the newspaper has published articles evaluating the so-called "child-free" movement, which it clearly endows with negative meaning by essentializing motherhood as "natural." The authors of these articles resort to an openly pathologizing rhetoric. Official pathologization of certain practices like the child-free lifestyle suggests that motherhood as the official ideology cannot be subjected to critical analysis, much less to wholesale rejection.

Lastly, the topic of motherhood is romanticized in order to legitimize its "normative" conception. The official discourse is based on an idealized and exaggerated image of motherhood, which is intended to identify only its positive aspects and ignore problems.

Thus, the female reproductive body is interpreted through the prism of the regime of “compulsory motherhood.” This regime has two modes: normalization and pathologization. All women’s life choices except for motherhood are pathologized. In addition, the regime of “compulsory motherhood” is characterized by a number of provisions related to the reproductive female body, which I describe below. Acceptable motherhood is a strictly defined type of motherhood. In other words, women are charged not only with the duty to fulfill their reproductive function, but to do so in a certain way and under certain conditions.

Discourse analysis of the newspaper articles allows us to discern the characteristics that comprise the “correct” form of motherhood, which I call “*normative motherhood*.”

First of all, motherhood is not considered outside of the discourse of the family: this means that it should take place within a *heterosexual marriage*. This is based on a more general principle of “heteronormativity,” according to which heterosexuality is the only normal way of configuring sexual and kinship relations. In addition, the normative concept of motherhood presented in the newspaper articles implies the birth of children not just to heterosexual parents but to legally married parents. Therefore, “single motherhood,” which is frequently discussed in the newspaper, is presented as problematic, undesirable, and a great threat for future generations: according to this depiction, children from single-parent families are likely to reproduce this model in their own lives. Thus, single motherhood is defined as a “social pathology,” and as such single mothers and their children are identified as members of “risk groups.”

Secondly, normative motherhood is linked with a concept of “health.” The articles present this mostly through the medicalization of the reproductive health of women. Prominent discourses focus on supposed threats to reproductive health: abortion, infections, alcoholism, smoking, promiscuity, early sexual activity, all of which are seen as having one major consequence—infertility. Simultaneously, since motherhood is conceived in terms of its state and public significance, these problems are threats not only to the individual but to the entire society. Therefore, special importance is granted not only to the preservation of women’s health but also to practices of preparing for the birth of a child. Articles frequently discuss “diseased women” who are at risk of giving birth to a sick child: women suffering from drug addiction, alcoholism, STDs, hepatitis, HIV, and so on. Such motherhood is deemed pathological, and special measures are created to “help” such women—for example, placing them in separate hospital wards during childbirth. The bodies of these women are medicalized even more than the bodies of women in general.

Thirdly, normative motherhood is motherhood carried out at the *normative age*. The state media promote the notion of an ideal age for a woman to have and raise children. Newspaper articles constantly invoke the concept of the “biological clock.” Both “early” and “late” motherhood is socially condemned.

In addition to the already described norms, the newspaper endorses another principle—the desirability of having multiple children. Belarusian discourse aims not only to promote motherhood and the family but to encourage large families

with many children, since such families are seen as a solution to the country's demographic "problem."

Thus, according to publications in *Sovetskaiia Belorussia*, normal motherhood is defined as multi-children motherhood realized within heterosexual marriage by healthy women of a particular age. Other options are socially disapproved of and pathologized.

To conclude, analysis of official rhetoric demonstrates how the female body is constructed and manipulated. In this article I tried to explicate and scrutinize the meanings that official discourse in Belarus has given to the female reproductive body. As a primary analytical category, I used the concept of a regime of "compulsory motherhood." In post-Soviet Belarus, motherhood remains a key component in understanding the role of the reproductive female body. Newspaper articles politicize the female body, which is depicted at the intersection of personal experience and state demographic policy. Motherhood appears as the main strategy and ideology for constructing the female body. This, in turn, gives rise to different practices inscribed by the state, in particular those surrounding women's health. The practice of childbearing should take place according to certain rules and under certain conditions. Endorsement of a "normative" conception of motherhood legitimizes some practices as socially desirable while pathologizing other that do not fit into this template. Woman's civil status is linked to her role as a mother, promoting the tendency of pushing women into more traditional social roles. Practices of constructing the female body within a pro-natalist regime create and reproduce the concept of "femininity," disciplining the female subject to perform prescribed social roles.

*Authorized translation from Russian by Anna Paretskaya*