"Wake up and think of the children!" Ambivalent relationship between motherhood, femininity, and anti-vaccination

Associate Professor, Ph.D., **Marita Zitmane**Ph.D. student **Elza Lāma**



- Worrying is the growing tendency to refuse to vaccinate children, based on both fears of the harmful side effects of vaccines and the argument that diseases can be overcome by various other -"alternative" - means
- Existing studies show that "vast majority" of people commenting, sharing and liking anti-vaccination information on Facebook are women. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend, how notions about femininity and motherhood relate to decisions about vaccination
- Study explores the ambivalent relationship between the dominant discourse of "intensive mothering", femininity and the "antivaccination" movement: the connection between gender roles, imposed by a patriarchal society, and the "antivaxx" movement

Theoretical background and relevant empirical studies

• Alternative medicine, anti-vaccination, and femininity

Alternative medicine and esoteric well-being is often assumed to be attractive to women because it is coherent with normative femininity legitimizing the traditional notion that women are socialized to embody in their care-giving. Recommending against vaccination is common amongst esoteric well-being practitioners.

• "Intensive mothering"

Reinforcing traditional gender roles and providing undivided attention to child, in order to ensure the best possible environment for his/her development.

• Mothers and social media

The everyday life of contemporary mothers is closely bound to social media, which in recent years have become platforms for digital diaries, "safe spaces" for social support, and even forums for those unanswered questions that usually are directed towards medical specialists.

Methodology and data

- Research employs discourse analysis and netnography approach to Facebook threads that are discussing arguments concerning vaccination of children
- Analysis of two Facebook groups "Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums" [Sympathetic Mothers' forum] and "Vakcīnrealitāte Latvijā" [Vaccine reality in Latvia] is carried out for period of eight months (October, 2020 – May 2021)
 - detail attention was brought to three posts

Father forbids mother to vaccinate the child Both parents have equal rights in Woman has to obey Vaccines are unsafe: Husband is wrong parenting and regarding vaccination and foolish man no point in discussion decisions "Zamuž" - tradition Woman cannot force Man cannot force his holds woman behind Vaccination in secret her decisions on the decisions on the man woman man Woman has superiority over man in family matters Mother will be Woman will be left to Upbringing Woman must seek blamed if child suffers care after the sick compromise child Ultimatum for husband Child will not be accepted in decent Educate husband education facilities Man can choose not Talk it through gently to vaccinate himself, but not his child Advice: not to vaccinate Advice: vaccinate

Findings

 Post and further thread of comments on exploring a situation, where the father and husband prohibits mother to vaccinate their children

To vaccinate according to vaccination calendar or to delay? Vaccinate according Individualistic Not to vaccinate at all to vaccination approach calendar Vaccination according to calendar Natural immunity is Vaccine contains All children were vaccinated in USSR may be harmful to far more effective such "horrors" health Mindful vaccination: One's organism has Even vaccinated Personal experience weighing pros and to fight one's own people may be battles carriers cons Vaccinating only Vaccination = putting Experience of close Even vaccinated those vaccines that child's health in friends or relatives people may get sick parents have had immediate risk Not to vaccinate = Personal experience "Modern cocktails" - not vaccinated and putting child's health are not trustworthy in risk healthy Trust in modern medicine Not to vaccinate = negligence from mother

Findings

 Post and further thread of comments on contemplating the pros and cons of vaccination according to the official calendar, set by medical professionals and institutions

If mother refuses "obligatory" vaccines, what will she do regarding Covid-19 vaccines? PRO "obligatory" PRO "obligatory" PRO "obligatory" AGAINST all vaccines, PRO vaccines, AGAINST vaccines, AGAINST vaccines Covid-19 vaccines Covid-19 vaccine all "modern" vaccines Vaccinate parents Natural immunity is "Bad reviews" Vaccine is "rushed" and children superior to vaccines regarding "modern" and "not enough vaccines tested" Follow advice from Vaccines are medical "Obligatory" dangerous and "I don't believe in this vaccines are rather harmful to health professionals safe and tested for a vaccine" number of years After personal experience with Vaccines create illness, vaccinate autism children "I believe in vaccines" Vaccines cause allergies

Findings

 Post and further thread of comments on asking women opposed to vaccinating to explain their choices regarding vaccination against Covid-19

Discussion

- The evidence of the reproduction of "intensive mothering" discourse in the posts and comments is visible;
- The patriarchal concept of motherhood is used to influence decisions in favor against the vaccination;
 - Study reveals a strong anti-vaccination discourse on social media targeting mothers using notions of traditional femininity, idealized motherhood, and visions of 'natural' immunity to paint vaccination as a poor choice for a responsible mother

Thank you!

maritaz@edu.lu.lv

elza.lama@lu.lv