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## Hardworking women: representations of lone mothers in the Swedish daily press

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### ABSTRACT

Lone mothers are a diverse group but it has been argued in the previous research that they tend to be homogenised. This article explores representations of single mothers in Swedish newspapers. Material from the two largest morning papers and the two largest tabloids was collected from the years 2015–2017. The results of the study suggest that although the newspaper representations do not fully reflect the diversity of social realities, there are indeed varying images of lone mothers in the sample. A recurring representation is as a comparatively poor and hardworking—even heroic—woman, who in political argumentation is referred to as someone in need of societal support and policy reforms. A less frequent representation, that often occurs in lengthy, in-depth pieces, is the affluent official person who despite her prosperity struggles with combining single (good) motherhood with her career, or the middle-class woman who becomes a lone mother via assisted reproductive technologies. Teenage motherhood (i.e., age), race/ethnicity, sexuality, and welfare dependence are seldom, if at all, alluded to. There is no vilification or condemnation of the lone mother, as has been found in research on other national contexts.

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## Introduction

Lone motherhood is a lived reality for many women and their children. It is also a social phenomenon that influences, and is impacted by, political decision-making. Representations of maternal practices—judged and normatively presented—have increasingly saturated popular culture and the public and political debate (Lisa Baraitser and Imogen Tyler 2010). The present article explores representations of lone mothers in Swedish newspapers with the purpose of investigating how these women figure as news. Representations of lone mothers in news media build upon and contribute to culture-specific understandings of single motherhood. Therefore, studying such representations is one inroad to understanding how meanings of lone motherhood circulate in a given society.

### *Lone mothers in context*

In Europe and North America, the lone parent group has increased, although the variation between countries is substantive, with high prevalence in, for instance, the UK and US,

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and low prevalence in southern Europe and some Eastern European nations. Also, the socio-demographics of the group have changed and become more diversified. Until the 1970s the lone parent was typically a widowed woman or a young mother, while the contemporary lone parent is older, most often separated or divorced, and increasingly continues to co-parent with the ex-partner (Laura Bernardi, Dimitri Mortelmans, and Ornella Larenza 2018).

In present day Sweden, close to 25% of all children between 0 and 17 years of age have parents who do not co-reside, most often due to divorce or separation. The majority of these children reside only or most of the time with the mother in a single-parent household, although father involvement and shared residential custody have increased. Almost 30% of children with separated parents share their time equally between the mother's and the father's households (Statistics Sweden 2018a, 2018b).

For almost a century, successive Swedish governments have introduced policies that support the dual-earner, dual-carer family model; they have encouraged all parents, including (lone) mothers, to participate in the paid labour market, provided universal financial support to all families with minor children, and have promoted father involvement in domestic tasks and childcare (Barbara Hobson and Mieko Takahashi 1997).<sup>1</sup> Motherhood in Sweden is characterised by combining parenting with professional work, and policies have contributed to most single mothers being self-providing rather than dependent on the means-tested social assistance (*försörjningsstöd*) (Bo Burström, Margaret Whitehead, Stephen Clayton, Sara Fritzell, Francesca Vannoni, and Giuseppe Costa 2010).<sup>2</sup> In the political discourse, the single mother has been viewed like “any other working mother,” since she is a taxpayer who typically provides for her family through paid work<sup>3</sup>. Single mothers have generally not been termed “welfare queens” or “scroungers” (Ulla Björnberg 1997; Hobson and Takahashi 1997), as they have been in other national contexts (Campbell Vivyan Adair 2000; Kim Allen, Imogen Tyler, and Sara De Benedictis 2014; Laura Briggs 2018; Ange-Marie Hancock 2004).

Single mother families in Sweden receive the same universal support as any other family (e.g., subsidised child-care, the general child allowance, and free health and dental care for minor children). In addition, they receive a monthly child allowance for single parents only (currently around 150 EUR/month/child), which is paid by the other parent (but waived in cases of shared residential custody) or by the government (if the other parent fails to pay). However, Swedish single mothers are generally disadvantaged regarding health and financial means compared to coupled mothers (Lisa F. Berkman, Yuhui Zheng, Maria M. Glymour, Mauricio Avendano, Axel Börsch-Suspan, and Eriks L. 2015; Burström, Whitehead, Clayton, Fritzell, Vannoni, and Costa 2010; Sara Fritzell, Gunilla Ringbäck Weitoft, Johan Fritzell, and Bo Burström 2007), and approximately 20% depend on social assistance (Hugo Stranz and Stefan Wiklund 2011); this is a low figure in comparison to other Western nations (Burström, Whitehead, Clayton, Fritzell, Vannoni and Costa 2010). Low economic standards and poverty<sup>4</sup> are particularly common if the mother is of foreign origin with a low educational level (Rädda Barnen 2015; Stranz and Wiklund 2011), and migrant mothers are overrepresented among single mothers (Statistics Sweden 2017). This said, it should be noted that the single parent group has become increasingly diverse in character, and a middle-aged lone mother with higher education and a strong affiliation to the labour market can be quite affluent (Försäkringskassan 2009).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the causes of single motherhood are shifting in the twenty-first century,

as a growing group of single mothers become pregnant via assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). In 2016 a law was introduced that grants single women free access to ARTs through the Swedish public health-care system; previously they had to go abroad and pay for the treatment. Single mothers who utilise ARTs are a small and socioeconomically relatively privileged group. This phenomenon affects the diversity of lone motherhood along lines of class, ethnicity, and age.

### **The study**

Although lone mothers are a heterogeneous group of individuals with diverse experiences, such differences, as Vanessa May (2010) has observed, are often disregarded and the “lone mother” is homogenised in the public and political discourse. The present article explores representations of lone mothers in Swedish newspapers in terms of variation, diversity and dominant representations. It analyses when and how single mothers are foregrounded in news media, and how their situations as lone parents are charged with value and meaning. The results are discussed in relation to the actual demographics of Swedish lone mothers, such as their national/ethnic origin, age, and socioeconomic situation.

Newspapers are a dominant form of news dissemination in Sweden; they continue to set the news agenda in the country. Although traditional news media consumption has decreased since the mid-1990s, newspaper readership continues to be quite substantive. Close to 50% of the Swedish population read an evening paper several times a week, and almost 50% subscribe to a morning paper (Johan Martinsson and Ulrika Andersson 2019). Consequently, it is relevant to study newspapers as a dominant genre that mediates representations of single mothers.

### **Previous research: the lone mother in the news and beyond**

Although there is extensive scholarship on representations of single mothers from other national contexts, studies on Swedish news media are limited. Previous studies on news media in the US and the UK show varying results, but negative images dominate. Much scholarship finds stereotypical, unfavourable representations of lone mothers, who mainly come across as poverty-stricken and in need of societal support, as in Emma Salter's (2018) exploration of articles in the UK newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Times*. Analyses of US news media likewise show that lone mothers are typically connected to poverty and adverse living conditions; they are also referred to as “benefit scroungers” and “welfare queens” who morally, socially, and financially pose a threat to society. Race/ethnicity and age are central in these representations since it is African Americans and young mothers particularly who are stereotyped and stigmatised (Adair 2000; Briggs 2018; Hancock 2004). Similar ways of representing single mothers have also appeared in the British press, and in public and political discourse (Simon Duncan and Rosalind Edwards 1999; Jean Carabine 2001; Jean Carabine 2007; Jane Pulkingham, Sylvia Fuller, and Paul Kershaw 2010; see also Shani Orgad and Sara De Benedictis 2015), and in policy analyses of Norway and Austria where the lone, non-working mother has been termed irresponsible and/or problematic (Simon Duncan and Monika Strell 2004; Monika Strell and Simon Duncan 2001). Although some studies have identified alternative, more positive representations that link lone motherhood to “escaping patriarchy” or accomplishing a positive “lifestyle change” (Duncan and Edwards 1999), most

studies find predominantly negative representations of lone mothers. In a recent study of news reports in eight British papers, single mothers who have utilised ARTs stand out as a specific sub-group who are not generally defamed or blamed although they do come across as deviating from the norm; they are “ordinary” but still a “social other” (Sophie Zadeh and Juliet Foster 2016).

Analyses of other genres, such as reality television and autobiographical novels, point to more complex representations. Among noteworthy examples is Eglè Kačkutė’s study of contemporary French autobiographical novels which discusses how migrant single mothers are envisioned as multiply marginalised in terms of not being native, coupled or middle-class, but also as resourceful and diligent women, struggling successfully to make good lives for themselves and their children in the new country (Eglė Kačkutė 2019). In a study of the MTV documentary series *16 and pregnant*, in which some participants are single mothers, the series is described as countering stereotypical images of African American teenage mothers as irresponsible welfare queens, since “these mothers [are] shown working or looking for employment and studying and trying to find work and school options that would allow them to work towards a better future for themselves and their children” (Natasha Howard 2016, 119). A recent UK study foregrounds another counter-image: “White Dee,” a welfare-dependent single mother in her 30s and the main character in the British reality television series *Benefit Street*. Allen et al. argue that the negative depiction of Dee as “stagnant, immobile and ‘born idle’” is somewhat counterbalanced by Dee being presented as “a community worker and campaigner for working-class communities,” a protagonist who is funny, likeable and heroic in all her strivings (Allen, Tyler, and De Benedictis 2014, 3).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, whereas scholarship demonstrates that representations of lone mothers in news media are predominantly marked by negativity, lone mothers in other genres are represented in more varied ways. The contribution of the present study is its focus on news reports in Sweden, a welfare state and a socio-political context that in many ways differs from the US and the UK, and where it has been argued that lone mothers are typically not morally or politically stigmatised in public discourses (Björnberg 1997), but where lone parenthood is still heavily gendered as female.

## Material and method

The data is collected from the paper editions of the four largest daily newspapers in Sweden during the years 2015–2017 (search date February 13 2018). Two are morning papers: *Dagens Nyheter* (DN; liberal) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD; conservative), and two are evening papers/tabloids: *Aftonbladet* (social-democratic) and *Expressen* (liberal). These dailies have wide national circulations in paper copy and online versions; they are central in setting the national news agenda, and hence contribute to a “national imaginary” (Benedict Anderson 1983; Arjun Appadurai 1996). As such, they may affect as well as reflect lived lives, subjectivities, political decision-making, knowledge production and power relations (Stuart Hall 1997).

Searches via the digital archive Retriever/Mediarkivet were based on variations on “lone mother” (Sw. *ensamstående mamma/mor/moder*, *ensam mamma/mor/moder*, *singelmamma*, *solomamma*) in singular and plural forms.<sup>7</sup> After the initial search, double hits and articles about national contexts other than Sweden were excluded, as were TV

tabloids. The resulting sample consisted of 245 articles (2015, 75; 2016, 85; 2017, 85), with about 60% of hits in the evening papers.<sup>8</sup> The data is rich and varied: it includes political statements (editorial pages, debate articles, political commentary, essays), news items, reviews (of books, movies, and TV and radio programmes), in-depth pieces (often based on interviews with celebrities or official persons), celebrity gossip and “spectacular” stories (in the evening papers), and obituaries.

The articles were initially categorised according to whether the single mother was a marginal or a central concern in the text. Most articles mention lone mothers only in passing, (216); only a small number focus on lone motherhood/lone mothers per se (29). The articles were also coded for socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and single motherhood by separation/divorce/accident, or via ARTs or adoption. Central themes in the overall data were then identified.

Through repeated reading of the sample, during and after coding and thematisation, dominant and less dominant patterns emerged. Some aspects of lone motherhood were found to be more or less absent (for example age, ethnicity and sexuality), while others were frequently referenced, such as low socioeconomic status/poverty, hardship, and the struggling single mother. Single motherhood via ARTs did not appear in many articles but nevertheless stood out in the sample since these articles were often in-depth, lengthy pieces.

Examining these representations and their internal relationality (in terms of prevalence and the space they were granted), we contextualise them and discuss their potential implications. Focusing on representations of lone mothers, we were interested in the constitutive power of symbols and language, and hence in the double meanings of “representation” as such, for an “image” of something also signals what/who is, or can be, that “something,” and is always linked to power (Hall 1997; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 2010). The analysis opens with an overview of the “invisibility” of certain aspects of lone motherhood. The sections that follow present visibilities, that is, more dominant, frequently recurring and central representations.

## **The single mother in the Swedish daily press**

Given the actual diversity of lone mothers in Sweden, it is noteworthy that in the data, there is high visibility for some axes of power, but low visibility for others; the result is that some lone mothers are more invisible than others. In terms of ethnicity, it is striking that the ethnic/national origin of the lone mother is seldom made explicit. Non-Nordic descent is mentioned in only 19 of the articles, and is then referred to by implication, for example, by the mention of a “non-Swedish” name or an immigrant-dense suburb. This “invisibility” or absence can be interpreted positively, as something that lessens the risk of stigmatising or stereotyping migrants (as poor, welfare reliant, et cetera). However, official statistics show that 19% of children with foreign origin reside with a single mother, compared to 13% of those with native origin (Statistics Sweden 2017), and migrant single mothers are particularly at risk for poverty, and thus welfare dependence (Rädda Barnen 2015). Therefore, the invisibility of diverse national origin in the newspapers can also be seen as problematic, in that it disguises the fact that (single) mothers of foreign background, and their children, are comparatively disadvantaged and may need additional societal support.

Sexuality is also relatively invisible in the sample, where heterosexuality is ubiquitous although seldom made explicit. Some articles mention past heterosexual relationships, others bring up problems with dating as a lone mother, since the time and energy for meeting a *man* are limited. Other texts offer “gossip” about the new man of a celebrity mother. Only one text (an interview about an autobiographically based novel) actually talks about the (hetero)sexual experiences of a lone mother. Links between lone motherhood and LGBTQ lives are close to nil; only one (1) article brings up non-heterosexual sexuality. Hence, the heterosexual norm saturates the material despite the fact that same-sex couples with children are relatively common and officially accepted in Swedish society (e.g., Karin Zetterqvist Nelson 2007). Furthermore, the father is more or less invisible in the data; overall, the single mother comes across as someone who parents alone, without the (financial, social, emotional) support from the child’s father (or some other co-parent).

Finally, age is seldom mentioned. A description of the lone mother as “young” appears in six articles. Becoming a mother at a relatively “old” age is alluded to in a few articles where the focus is single women’s transition to motherhood via adoption or ARTs. Neither teenage motherhood nor middle-aged motherhood is spoken of as a social problem; this contrasts with studies of Anglo-American news media (e.g., Duncan and Edwards 1999; Hancock 2004; Kirsty Budds, Abigail Locke, and Vivien Burr 2013).

Unlike ethnicity, sexuality, and age, socioeconomic status has high visibility in the sample. The following section analyses representations of the poor single mother.

### ***The poor and/or heroic mother***

A very prevalent representation of the lone mother is as someone who struggles to make ends meet (98/245). References to poverty and economic hardship are mentioned in 83 articles, and 15 additional articles refer to lone mothers in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, or with “working-class” or refugee status, implicitly indicating low socioeconomic status.

In 46 articles, “single mothers” is used as an example of a category—often mentioned in passing, together with other categories, such as migrants or retirees—in need of increased societal support: “families, particularly the single mothers ... struggle hard to make their everyday life work. Sweden is doing well, and we shouldn’t have any poor children” (*Aftonbladet*, September 21 2017). These texts—editorials, interviews, columns, and opinion pieces—contain political arguments and promote welfare reforms; lone mothers are discursively constructed as poor and suffering, and are used as anonymous “props” to further an argument. Another illustrative example is a political column that states: “Lower salaries cause only lower salaries, and worse conditions cause only worse conditions. It [lower salaries] will only increase the numbers of lone mothers who work and wear themselves out but still can’t afford new boots for the winter” (*Aftonbladet* July 24 2015). Notably, the lone mother is envisioned here as a worker who provides for herself and her children by paid labour, although her salary is low. Not once in the material is she described as a burden to society, or criticised because of her status as poor. However, she is represented as in need of help so that she can improve her situation. Besides suggestions for welfare reform there are articles about private initiatives for material and social support to single-mother families, especially around Christmas.

Support to the lone mother is mostly linked to the welfare state, however, and to calls for political action to support these mothers. This is true across the political spectrum. The leader of the left party (Vänsterpartiet) is cited as saying that his New Year's Eve promise is to "[d]o what we promised in the budget. At last, all lone mothers who need free medicine and increased child allowance will have it" (*Expressen*, January 3 2015). In a slightly different vein, a politician from the conservative party (Moderaterna) proposes an educational reform that would better support lone mothers and their children: a shift from two to three terms per school year, and a shortened summer break, since "[c]hildren in socioeconomically weak families, for instance, families with lone mothers, are disfavoured by long summer breaks" (*SvD*, March 29 2016). Although there may be good intentions behind these political suggestions and initiatives, they certainly offer categorical and homogenised descriptions of lone mothers as poor, and hence these articles risk stigmatising lone mothers as a group.

In addition to limited financial means, lone motherhood is often connected to a scarcity of time and energy. Such representations occur not least in articles based on interviews with successful people (businessmen, artists, athletes), who grew up with a single mother. The example below focuses on a wealthy man who built his own company from scratch, but who grew up with a single, migrant, refugee mother. It is one of a few articles that explicitly refer to national, Non-Nordic origin.

He was five years old when he arrived [in Sweden] with his mother who was a nurse. It took six to seven years before she got a job. Reza and his mother are the epitome of everything that is hard in our country: Refugee! Lone mother! And a nurse, the occupation that all lone mothers in the world appear to have when their troubles are up for debate. (*Aftonbladet*, November 7 2015)

In this quotation, Reza exemplifies the trajectory towards success in spite of growing up with a lone mother. The narrative is recurrent. Another example appears in a review of a radio programme in which a famous musician, now in his sixties, talks about his life and upbringing. The reviewer describes how he gets to:

meet the boy who grew up with a lone mother who struggled hard to put food on the table, and his two brothers with whom he shared the bed. The 12-year old who started Lasse Stefanz, the dance band that 48 years and 47 albums later is the most successful Nordic dance band. (*Expressen*, July 27 2015)

Lone mothers, in these narratives of/about grown children who have made a name for themselves, struggled hard, put food on the table, cared for their children, acted responsibly and selflessly and are true survivors.

The lone striving mother hence comes across as heroic and admirable; she struggles and manages against the odds, and her children likewise succeed in spite of her lone mother status. A famous artist is cited as saying:

Sometimes you forget how fortunate you are. At these times, I think about mum, she didn't have such a great time. She was a lone mother with three children and worked as a cleaning lady at a hospital. She struggled hard as a heroine to put food on the table. (*DN*, January 1 2015)

This artist specifically refers to his mother as a "heroine", a good, admirable mother. The heroine image recurs in general statements about lone mothers as a group where their hardship is implied. A high-profile medical doctor and scholar, Agnes Wold, when asked who she admires, answers: "The only ones I admire are lone mothers and fathers" (*Expressen*,



March 8 2016). Similarly, Annie Lööf, leader of a liberal party (Centern), when asked to name a mother she wants to celebrate on mothers' day, answers: "All lone mothers. I became a mother myself this year, and I am so impressed by how they do it alone" (*Expressen*, November 22 2016). A famous artist who is asked to name a woman he admires, responds: "My sister Julia. As a single mother, she has struggled through teacher education and florist training. She is beautiful, clever, fun, and the best parent in the world" (*Aftonbladet*, March 8 2015). In an in-depth piece about household savings and coping on limited means, a lone mother—described as happy, contented and hardworking—provides examples of how she managed to single-handedly renovate her house as well as afford all she needs for her twins on her own through thrift (*Expressen*, October 22 2015). Single mothers come across as admirable and self-reliant, and this is consistent with the material referring to lone mothers in relative poverty as a whole.

As the examples above demonstrate, the lone mother carries no element of scandal or denigration in the data; there is no case of vilification or moral questioning. She is "ordinary" although a "social other" (cf. Zadeh and Foster 2016) who successfully cares for her children and provides for her family (Björnberg 1997), yet she may suffer and/or struggle more than other parents. In other words, the poor lone mother is represented as someone who has (financial) problems but not as someone who is a problem herself (cf. Adair 2000; Briggs 2018; Duncan and Edwards 1999; Hancock 2004).

### ***The well off (yet struggling) mother***

Representations of lone mothers as well off and resourceful (80/245) appear mainly in pieces about Swedish "celebrity mothers" (artists, actors, bloggers/influencers and TV personalities), as well as in articles about older women in official positions or high-status professions (politicians or business women) who in earlier life were single mothers with minor children but nevertheless achieved a flourishing career. The affluent lone mother also appears in texts about single motherhood via ARTs or adoption.

In texts focusing on affluent middle-class or celebrity single mothers, wealth/finances are rarely explicitly mentioned. As with the texts focusing on poor lone mothers, many articles on affluent mothers imply other kinds of hardship, supporting the understanding of lone motherhood as more challenging than motherhood for coupled women. For instance, in a review of an autobiographical book by a famous researcher, we are told that: "*Despite the fact* that she was a single mother, she finished her PhD at 31 and got new assignments straight after, and became one of Sweden's most prominent researchers" (*Aftonbladet*, April 1 2015; our emphasis). Such statements rest on an assumption that combining single motherhood with a career is a difficulty that may be overcome only against the odds. There are also articles focusing on official persons or celebrities who admiringly describe their childhood with a single mother as good although "different," as when a successful athlete says about her mother: "She has meant the world to me. She is a great role model" (*Aftonbladet*, April 4 2016).

The "celebrity articles" that give voice to lone mothers focus on plans to adopt a child on one's own, on (not) dating, and combining busy professional lives with the family. Contrary to the representations of poor mothers in the data, celebrity mothers come across as (hetero)sexual beings who date/have dated and wish/ed for a partner. A famous TV personality states: "I have worked a lot and missed other things in life. I have had a hard

time with everyday life as a single mother. But my boyfriend has been a great support” (*Expressen*, January 12 2017). As this quotation suggests, although they struggle, celebrity mothers are represented as having a supportive social network in addition to financial resources. An article that focuses on the successful career of an artist refers to elements of hardship as a single mother—quarrels with a teenage daughter—but the artist’s struggles have been positively affirmed by people around her, and are also acknowledged in the article heading, which dubs her a “Strong woman” (*Expressen*, December 31 2016). Although times may have been hard, the single celebrity mother is never represented as vulnerable, isolated, or in need of social support from the state. Rather, she is described as resourceful in social and financial terms. When asked about plans to adopt a child, one celebrity mother states simply: “I have financial resources and I have the required social network” (*Expressen*, April 30 2015); this is a rare occasion when a positive financial situation is made explicit.

Other examples of affluent/resourceful lone mothers can be found in the articles on ART mothers, which stand out as a special sub-set in the data. Here, plenty of textual space is given to the situation as a single mother, and to the maternal voice as such, in long interviews and in-depth pieces.<sup>9</sup> Hence, a minority phenomenon (approximately 3% of births in Sweden are the result of ARTs, including couples and singles) gains quite high visibility in terms of focus, text length, and inclusion of the mother’s voice. Clearly, this is newsworthy material. In part, this is a result of the new law in 2016, which makes pregnancy via donor insemination available to single women via the public health-care system, but the articles also reflect a recent (or recently visibilised) practice among single women, who for over two decades have been attending clinics abroad, predominantly in Denmark, to achieve pregnancy “on their own.”

Lone mothers via ARTs are relatively affluent middle-class women in their thirties and forties. However, in the texts, financial considerations go unmentioned, except in one case where the new law of 2016 is described as “democratic” since it extends the right to become a mother via a sperm donor to all single women, not just those who can afford expensive treatment abroad (*SvD*, January 16 2016).

The ART mother describes herself as having planned her parenthood carefully, as exemplified by one mother who says in an interview: “children who are the result of insemination of single mothers are longed-for and planned” (*DN*, October 16 2015). In no text is the ART mother referred to as a “single mother by choice” (cf. Valerie S. Mannis 1999; Rosanna Hertz 2006), nor is single motherhood represented as a way of “escaping patriarchy” (cf. Duncan and Edwards 1999). One in-depth article mentions the notion of escaping patriarchy, only to question that notion. That women voluntarily would choose to reproduce without men is envisioned as unrealistic, since, in the words on one ART mother who identifies as heterosexual “[h]umans do fall in love and like each other’s company. We find pleasure in sharing our lives and experiencing love. The law [in 2016] only makes possible yet another way to have a family” (*SvD*, March 6 2016). Crucially, this statement is a response to criticisms that were voiced against the new law as possibly leading to men/fathers becoming superfluous as women reproduce “on their own.”

Several of the ART articles, like the celebrity articles focused on adoption, describe the single mother as having had few other options if she was to become a parent, since she did not have a (male) partner. One divorced celebrity mother with one child is

quoted as not “having the time” to wait for a new partner who might be a father to a second child, although this was what she would have preferred; hence, she will now have to adopt on her own if there is to be another child (*Expressen*, July 6 2016). Similarly, an ART mother is quoted as saying: “I wanted another child but I couldn’t hang around and wait for a partner, so after thinking for some time I decided to do it by myself” (*SvD*, January 16 2015). In another text, a woman’s decision to go to Denmark for insemination (before the law of 2016 was introduced) is justified as follows: “She was 34 years of age when she decided to get inseminated. The relationship with the love of her life was over and she went through a crisis: Was the dream about a family forever broken?” (*Aftonbladet*, March 24 2016). The ART mother is thus represented as someone who “chose” single motherhood when the option to start a family with a partner seemed no longer to be available; single motherhood by utilising ARTs typically figures as a final resort.

The ART sample contains different stances on the importance of the father and the two-parent family. In some of the articles the idea that a two-parent arrangement is essential for the child’s wellbeing is questioned, while in others it is affirmed. One example of the former appears in a letter to the editor:

Following the introduction of the new law, a debate has started—the one about the lone mother’s children having only one legal guardian. I think this is a ridiculous question. In Sweden there are thousands of children who for different reasons have access to only one parent. The notion that having two parents is always best for the child is an outdated idea that requires revision. (*Aftonbladet*, March 24 2016)

In the above quote, the two-parent arrangement comes across as more or less obsolete. However, the idea of children conceived by one parent is also rejected when the editorial page of *Expressen* states:

It is good news that women in the future will not need to go abroad to get pregnant. There is no reason to stop happy family formation. But at the same time no one, least of all the government, must pretend that the law is without problems. It is not an “ancient view” that children benefit from a stable social network. It is not reactionary to claim that it may be hard to be a lone mother, psychologically, socially and financially. This is a fact. (*Expressen*, May 25 2015)

It is noteworthy that “father absence” is not formulated as the problem here, but rather the child’s need for stability and the mother’s need for support. Hence, the editorial draws on a dominant way that lone mothers are represented in the material: as vulnerable and subjected to hardship of many kinds. The lengthy reflections in the ART segment of the sample suggest that these lone mothers may be more subject to questioning and critique than are the poor women who have become lone mothers by separation/divorce who populate the majority of the sample. This needs further exploration.

### **Concluding discussion: varying representations of a hardworking woman**

The present study has offered an analysis of how lone mothers figure in Swedish daily newspapers. Newspapers are influential in setting the news agenda in Sweden (Martinsson and Andersson 2019), and although there is extensive scholarship on representations of single mothers from other national contexts, studies on Swedish news media are scarce. The single mother family is comparatively common in the country:

close to 25% of all Swedish children between 0 and 17 years of age have parents who do not co-reside, and the majority of these reside only or most of the time with the mother, although father involvement and shared residential custody have increased (Statistics Sweden 2018a, 2018b).

One common representation of the lone mother in the newspapers is as poor, struggling, and in need of (social; government; charity) support. However, while this representation dominates in terms of numbers of mentions, it does not dominate in terms of textual space or presence of voice. Meanwhile, a minority category of lone mothers—those who hold this status after (expensive) ART procedures or transnational adoption, and/or who are celebrities—are granted substantial textual space, and with the presence of their own voice.

Teenage motherhood is rare in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2019a), and references to age—young or old—are rare in the sample. Racial/ethnic diversity is common in Sweden (19% of the population were born abroad, Statistics Sweden 2019b), and migrants are overrepresented as single mothers (Statistics Sweden 2017) but this reality is invisible in the newspapers. Although the public and political rhetoric on immigrants and immigration has been both harsh and negative, especially since 2015 when the country experienced vast refugee immigration, the migrant single (welfare-dependent) mother is not an image that appears. This invisibility can be seen as positive, in that poor migrant mothers are not stigmatised or defamed, but also as problematic since it disguises the fact that (single) mothers of foreign background and their children are comparatively disadvantaged.

Overall in the sample, the single mother comes across as someone who parents alone, without the (financial or social) support from the child's father (or some other co-parent). In this way, the single mother is predominantly represented in ways that contrast with gender-equal Swedish family policies that over the past 50 years have encouraged dual-earner, dual-carer families and involved fatherhood (Michael Wells and Disa Bergnehr 2014). It also deviates from official statistics and previous research that shows that co-parenting after divorce/separation has increased and is rather common in Sweden (Statistics Sweden 2018b; see also Bernardi, Mortelmans, and Larenza, 2018). There is no difference between articles on "working-class" or "middle-class" mothers in this respect (cf. Orgad and De Benedictis 2015)—the father is generally absent in texts on socio-economically disadvantaged mothers as well as texts on well off mothers and affluent celebrities. Hence, it seems that in newspapers, lone mothers are represented as more lonely than they are in social reality.

Crucially, the heterosexual, two-parent family norm saturates the material. Lone motherhood is a "social other"—an undesirable status (connected to hardship). Nowhere is it pictured as a way to escape patriarchy (cf. Duncan and Edwards 1999), nor does lone motherhood via ARTs come across as fundamentally "by choice" (cf. Hertz 2006; Mannis 1999). ART mothers are represented as having failed to find a partner with whom to conceive a child and share family life, not as women who prioritise parental solitude or living an alternative family life.

The Swedish welfare regime is built upon the social-democratic ideal of two-income families and dual-worker parents, and mothers' participation in paid labour is historical, uncontroversial, and has been a governmental goal aimed at emancipating women. As our study suggests, in spite of the socioeconomic realities of many lone mothers—as single providers with scarce finances—these mothers are not demonised or singled out as burdens to society. This is different from other national contexts. For instance, policy

analyses, although somewhat dated, of Norway, another Nordic welfare state, has shown that lone mothers are singled out as a problematic group for society due to high rates of welfare dependency and unemployment (Duncan and Strell 2004).

Overall, the present study provides a complex picture of single mothers as a heterogeneous group, from poor to middle-class to affluent celebrities. Whether poor or rich, the lone mother is typically represented as hardworking, struggling, and a good mother. To some extent this supports previous research which suggests that the single mother in Sweden has not been politically or publically defamed; she is viewed “like any other working mother” (Björnberg 1997). However, our study also demonstrates that although she is “ordinary” in some respects, she is also continuously represented as a “social other” (cf. Zadeh and Foster 2016). The common use of “lone mothers” as an example of people in financial hardship who need (further) societal support, risks stigmatising and/or victimising the single mother, although this may be counterbalanced by the agency and resourcefulness emphasised in descriptions of lone mothers as hardworking, resilient and admirable.

The recurrent representation of lone motherhood as hard, but not impossible, can be said to reflect reality, but also reiterates lone motherhood as a hardship; indeed, the news material indicates diversification in understandings of “hardship” depending on the socioeconomic status of the lone mother in question. Hence, although the representations do not reflect the diversity of social realities, there are indeed diverse images of the lone mother in the sample. This calls for more studies of various media genres and across different national contexts, as well as for comparative work.

## Notes

1. Some pertinent reforms were introduced in the 1970s, for example, government-funded parental leave insurance (at present: 13 months, that can be shared between two parents/guardians or another adult who cohabit or is married to the parent), guaranteed, subsidised child-care for children aged 1–5, and the legal right to decrease one’s working hours by up to 25% per (full-time) week at any job when parenting a young child (Wells and Bergnehr 2014).
2. In Sweden, gender equality and female emancipation have been part of the political discourse for more than half a century (Wells and Bergnehr 2014). But women, and mothers, still fare worse than men in many respects; they earn less, they are underrepresented in high positions, they take a larger share of household duties and child-care, and are victims of domestic violence. It is expected of them to prioritise home and family—to be a good caring mother—although they are also in full-time paid employment. The two-parent, dual-earner family is the norm, and in general, required for a middle-class life style (Hanne Haavind and Eva Magnusson 2005).
3. The number of teenage mothers is low in Sweden; 1% of all children born in 2018 had a mother under 20 years of age (Statistics Sweden 2019a).
4. Definitions of poverty vary. Here, a household with an income 60% or less of the median income in Sweden is defined as having low economic standards and its residents as living in poverty (Rädda Barnen 2015).
5. A recent interview study, focusing on single mothers’ narratives, presents a varied picture of how they describe their everyday life in terms of support from social networks, financial resources and individual experiences (Jenny Alsarve, Åsa Lundqvist, and Christina Roman 2017; Christine Roman 2018).
6. See also studies of fictional TV, e.g., (Dwayne Avery 2016; Suzanna Danuta Walters and Laura Harrison 2012).

7. In this text, we use “lone mother” and “single mother” interchangeably. By far the most common term to refer to lone mothers in the sample is *ensamstående mamma* (appr. “single/lone mum”). Although terms such as single/solo mother exist in both English and Swedish, and occur in the research literature and elsewhere, they are rare or non-existent in this sample. “Single mother/s” (“*singelmamma*”) occurs in only seven out of the 245 articles, and “solo mother” (“*solomamma*”) not once. While translation is always difficult between languages and cultures, we choose “single/lone mother” as the terms we perceive as closest to *ensamstående mamma*.
8. There are more hits from the tabloids: *Aftonbladet*: 67, *Expressen*: 70, *Dagens Nyheter*: 54, *Svenska Dagbladet*: 49, paper undetectable: 5.
9. Although as many as 82 texts in the sample include some quotation/statement by a lone mother, the majority of these are marginal elements in the article.

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