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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Regretting parenthood in a family friendly, 'gender equal' society: accounts from Swedish online forums

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## ABSTRACT

In the past decades, parents have used online forums to discuss challenges associated with parenthood, seeking support from other parents as well as professional advice. A highly sensitive topic discussed in these forums is regret about having children. Previous studies from various contexts have highlighted how regret, as expressed online, is often connected to difficulties of living up to and identifying with ideals of parenting, and that parenthood leads to feelings of exhaustion, entrapment and a negative self-image. In this article, I analyze how regret is expressed in two major Swedish online forums, including accounts from 142 parents. Sweden is a country that is often highlighted internationally as a pioneer in gender equality, with laws that protect sexual and reproductive rights and family-friendly policies that support parents in combining family life and work life. In light of this, I focus on the different decisions related to parenthood that people regret, the challenges and disappointments that family life has brought to parents, and the consequences that parenthood has had on their lives. I show how gender-equal parenting ideals are highly present in the discussions, and how they coexist and conflict with more traditional parenting behaviours and patterns.

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## Introduction

Is it possible to regret parenthood? This question has been raised in the media across various countries in the past years, following the release of Orna Donath's study on maternal regret (Donath, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Donath's study was based on interviews with Israeli women of different ages and social backgrounds, all claiming that if they could turn back time they would not have become mothers. They expressed how they had lost themselves, their freedom, control and time because of motherhood, and how this feeling of regret remained through all stages of life. The study was conducted in a society where motherhood is regarded as an obligation and childcare is seen as a

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mainly female task (Donath, 2017). This raises questions about how regret is experienced in other social contexts, and how regret is experienced by fathers.

Donath's study garnered a lot of attention and discussions worldwide, and more studies on the matter have followed (Garncarek, 2020; Heffernan & Stone, 2021a, 2021b; Matley, 2020; Moore & Abetz, 2019; Piotrowski, 2021; Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021).

Most recently, a handful of studies from various countries have been published on how parenthood regret is communicated in *online forums*. Online forums have become the go-to-place for parents (particularly mothers) over the past two decades to discuss parenting challenges (Plantin & Daneback, 2009), and it has been shown that the anonymity of the forums makes it possible for people to discuss taboo subjects and express themselves in socially non-normative ways (Jaworska, 2018; Mackenzie, 2019). So far, the studies of regret in online forums are all from western contexts and most of them have focused on maternal regret only.

One of the contexts studied is the UK, a country that was ranked sixth in the EU on the Gender Equality Index in 2020 (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020). However, there are still obvious gender inequalities in the division of childcare between mothers and fathers, and according to Kaufman and Grönlund (2021), taking longer leave, working part-time and limiting daycare have become means for UK mothers to demonstrate 'good' motherhood. In David Matley's (2020) study of Mumsnet, regretful mothers used the online forum to create a self-understanding outside the binary discourse about good/bad motherhood. The mothers expressed that they had lost themselves in the transition from childfree woman to mother; they neither felt like themselves nor like the ideal mother who is 'good' and self-sacrificing, despite trying to live up to the expectations. They felt guilty and ashamed that they were not happy enough, even though they had been blessed with a healthy child. This led them to yearn for their past, child-free lives, and distance themselves from idealized, child-centered motherhood.

Similarly, in Emilia Garncarek's (2020) study of Polish forums, regretful mothers expressed sadness, anger, disappointment and shame. These emotions were directed towards the experience of motherhood or the children themselves, and in some cases a combination of the two. The negative emotions sprouted from the pressure to live up to the motherhood ideal, exhaustion from taking responsibility for the child, and a lack of partner support. The mothers also experienced a lack of self-determination and problems combining their mother roles with their professional roles. The study was set in a context where most women take sole responsibility for household chores (Garncarek, 2020), and Poland is one of the lowest-ranked countries in the Gender Equality Index.

Although Finland is a strong welfare state aiming for gender equality and family-friendly policies, and ranks fourth on EU's Gender Equality Index, Sihto and Mustosmäki (2021) found that reasons to regret motherhood in Finnish online forums were quite similar to what has been identified in other contexts. Mothers expressed exhaustion with what has been described as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and consequent feelings of inadequacy, guilt, frustration, entrapment and anger. Sihto & Mustosmäki explain that despite the policies, Finns have relatively traditional attitudes and practices concerning the division of paid work and childcare compared with other Nordic populations, and

Finnish mothers take over 90% of the parental leave and spend twice as much time on childcare duties as fathers.

The only research including both mothers' and fathers' online accounts of regret is an American study by Moore and Abetz (2019). This study found that parenthood regret often concerned the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, rather than parenthood *per se*. Only a smaller category of parents stated that they desired a child-free life. This category of parents expressed, unlike the first, that if they had been able to turn back time, they would have chosen to *never* become parents. Moore & Abetz argue that it is less acceptable to express regretting parenthood *per se*, than regretting the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, since regretting parenthood *per se* represents the ultimate parental failure (Moore & Abetz, 2019). In terms of gender, the authors mostly found similarities in why parents experienced regret. However, they found one difference in how parents articulated parenthood disdain (how they hated parental tasks), which were coloured by traditional gender expectations regarding the mother role (caregiver) and father role (breadwinner).

All in all, the previous studies illustrate that regret, as expressed online, is often connected to difficulties living up to and identifying with (glorified) ideals of parenting, and that parenthood leads to feelings of exhaustion, entrapment and a negative self-image. Parenting in these contexts stands out as highly gendered since caregiving is mainly described as a maternal task, while fathers still are still primarily expected to be breadwinners. However, all but one focus on maternal regret only, which makes a comparison between maternal and paternal experiences difficult.

In this article, I contribute to the literature on parenthood regret by investigating how mothers and fathers express regret in Swedish online forums. Sweden ranks first in the EU on the Gender Equality Index and is often highlighted internationally as a pioneer in gender equality, to the extent that the image of a 'gender equal', white middle-class parent now represents Swedishness (Björk, 2017). Having children is a strong imperative also in this context, and there are normative expectations of how a parent should behave. A 'legitimate' Swedish parent is expected to be child-centered and tolerant, and not to perceive or describe one's child as difficult and demanding (Westberg, 2016). There is a strong norm of involved parenthood, which means giving love, time and support to the child, as well as actively reflecting on one's parenting (Dermott, 2017). In contemporary Sweden, this applies to mothers as well as fathers (Forsberg, 2007; Johansson, 2011; Johansson & Klinth, 2008). In an age characterized by self-reflection, but also by weakened informal child support from family and friends, it is common among parents in general, but especially middle-class mothers aged 30–35, to seek information and social support online on how to be a good parent (Plantin & Daneback, 2009).

Nordic parents have access to state support to an extent that parents in many other countries lack — for example, long, paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, subsidized childcare, and a child allowance. Family-friendly policies have been in place since the 1970s to enable parents to combine family life and work life. Parents in Sweden have the right to 480 days of parental leave per child, and three months are earmarked for each parent (if there are two). Currently, fathers' take-up of parental leave is about 30%. Although not intended as pronatalist measures, these family policies have likely been a contributing factor to why total fertility rates in Sweden have been remarkably stable during the past decades (Ellingsæter, 2009; Esping-Andersen, 2016). However, the

parental experience is not necessarily easier in a country with gender equality ideals. In fact, according to a recent multinational study, high egalitarian values at the individual level and high gender equality at the societal level are associated with higher degrees of burnout levels in mothers (Roskam et al., 2022). Roskam et al. suggest that this can be, in part, a consequence of relationships turning out to be less gender equal than expected.

Another important factor related to reproductive decision-making and regret is the access to contraceptive counselling and abortion. In Sweden, contraceptive counselling is free of charge and abortion is allowed up to gestational week 18 (and on special grounds up to week 22). These are seen as important measures to ensure women's right to make independent reproductive decisions. However, a recent study shows that 7% of Swedes aged 30–85 have at some point had a child without wanting to (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2019), which questions the actual freedom of choice when it comes to reproduction.

Today, having children is often discussed as a given as well as a choice. In many contexts, becoming a parent is viewed as a matter of course, since procreation is regarded as a/the meaning of life. At the same time, it is constructed as involving many choices, such as *when*, *how*, *how many* and *with whom* to have children (Alvarez, 2018; Bodin & Käll, 2020; Donath, 2015b). Since the 1970s, it has increasingly also been discussed as a matter of *if*: whether one should choose parenthood or not (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Houseknecht, 1987). Overall, parenthood is increasingly expected to be planned and viewed as a project (Bodin et al., 2021).

In light of Sweden's strong reproductive rights, family friendly policies and the norm that parents of all genders should be practicing involved parenthood (Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021), it becomes particularly interesting to study parenthood regret. In this paper, I focus on the following questions: Which decision(s) related to having children do Swedish parents regret and why? How can we understand their experiences and expressions of regret in relation to contemporary social ideals of gender, equality and freedom of choice?

## Materials and methods

This article is part of a larger research project investigating what it means to regret parenthood in Sweden. The focus in this particular article is on how regret is expressed in Swedish online forums, and how regret can be understood in relation to the Swedish context. Reviewing online forums showed that parents have discussed this topic for much longer than it has been debated in the media. In this article, I have chosen to focus on two online forums where the topic has been discussed the longest. I chose these two forums because they have been the largest online discussion boards in Sweden throughout the 2000s and they provide accounts from both mothers and fathers. One forum has an explicit focus on family issues (F1) with 3 million visits per month, while the other does not have a specific focus but encourages 'freedom of speech, non-consensus and divergent views' (F2) and has 20 million visits per month. According to similarweb.com, both forums are currently used by women and men equally, but in the specific threads I have read it is clear that there are more women writing about regret in F1 and more men in F2. It should be said that my interpretation

of gender is based on how people described themselves and their partner, e.g. as father, husband, mother, wife, pregnant, and does not necessarily correlate with how the users would self-identify. Furthermore, most of the regretful parents, in both forums, seemed to have young children, i.e. children under age 10. Hence, this study mainly highlights regret among parents who have children that still need daily care.

The material was retrieved during 2021. To gather data, I first used the forums' own search functions, using the phrases 'regret children' and 'regret parenthood'. I later supplemented this with a Google search (search phrase + forum name), which revealed many additional threads, usually older, shorter or less viewed. The aim was to find all posts about parenthood regret that had ever been written in the forums to get a broad sense of the major themes in parents' accounts of regret.

In total, 81 threads from F1 were found, the first created in 2003 (the same year as the forum was founded) and the last in 2021. Most threads had been active a few days or weeks, while a few had been inactive for months or years and later reactivated. The most active thread was used back and forth during a six-year period. The number of posts in each thread ranged from three to 770 (mean 63) and the threads had been viewed between 68 and 111, 614 times (mean 9968). The threads were either started by someone who felt regret, someone who was afraid of feeling regret (if they, for example, had a/another child), or someone curious to know if other people felt regret. All but 10 were labeled 'sensitive issue', which means that people posting in the thread were obliged by the forum rules to be extra respectful and supporting (otherwise they would be banned) and the users were allowed to be completely anonymous.

Fifteen threads dealing with regret were found in F2. The first was created in 2008 (eight years after the forum was founded) and the last in 2020, and the number of posts in each thread ranged between two and 394 (mean 134). No information was available on how many times the threads had been viewed. To write in the forum, an account with a pseudonym was needed. None of the threads were started by someone who regretted parenthood; rather, they were all initiated by someone asking if this was possible and how common it was. Two threads were explicitly targeting men only. It was striking to see how the discussions in F2 were often driven by childfree individuals, who seemingly used the possibility of regret as a powerful argument to never have children.

When the data collection was finalized, the threads were read through and all posts that were written by *someone who felt regret* (96 users in F1 and 46 in F2) were copied into the software NVivo. Comments from people who did not regret parenthood were not included, since although highly interesting, analyzing other people's reactions lies outside the scope of this particular article. I thereafter used a stepwise procedure for reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022), guided by a social constructivist epistemological standpoint. Braun & Clarke describe the analytic process as iterative, as the researcher moves back and forth between the steps. I read through the posts several times and gradually started coding the data inductively, focusing mostly on the manifest content describing what the parents were regretting and why. When the first coding was done, I reviewed all codes and looked for similarities and patterns, grouping some together under themes and sub-themes. I thereafter went back and made some adjustments in the coding and themes, and then focused on the contextual factors. The final themes that I will present below

are *Getting off on the wrong foot*, and *If I had known then what I know now ...*, with the sub-themes *Not fitting the role*, *Managing broken relationships*, and *Wellbeing issues*.

Although the analysis was inductive and data-driven, my interpretation of the findings is guided by my previous knowledge of and interest in family and gender studies. My theoretical approach is based on the assumption that gender (and parenthood) is socially constructed; it is something we do in interaction with others rather than something we are, and it changes with time and context (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This perspective acknowledges mothering and fathering as produced or enabled by structural arrangements, for example, between work and family. My analysis has also been inspired by Jai Mackenzie's work on language, gender and parenthood online (2019), in which she explores how mothers use the online forum Mumsnet to position themselves in relation to various discourses on motherhood.

The methodology I have chosen obviously has its limitations. The posts used in this article provide temporary insights into the parents' feelings about parenthood. I cannot tell if the parents intentionally went to the forums to discuss the issue, or if they ended up there by chance. Neither can I tell if their feelings are expressions of sudden and temporary despair, or if the feelings might be longer-lasting. Only in one case did the user come back many years later, revealing that while things had improved, she still regretted parenthood. I know very little about the users' backgrounds and personal characteristics, such as their age, education or geographical location. However, it seems that most parents had become parents while in a heterosexual relationship, at least no one stated that they had become single parents (voluntarily) or within a same-sex relationship.

My study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Agency [Dnr 2020-05957]. However, I agree with Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda (2017, p. 302) that it is difficult to talk about 'ethical research' on the Internet, and that we rather have to strive for 'ethically-informed' research practices. The important thing as a researcher is therefore to engage with research ethics as a deliberative process. In this study, I have only used threads and posts that are available without login or membership. Out of respect for the users' integrity and considering the sensitivity of the topic, I have also chosen to not share (1) the names of the two online forums, (2) the user pseudonyms, or (3) the original quotes in Swedish, to avoid the possibility of tracing quotations back to their original source through a search engine. Although users are aware that they write their posts publicly, they might not have considered that their posts would be used in research and published open access (Zimmer & Kinder-Kurlanda, 2017). For the same reason, I also decided not to declare my presence in the forums, since this would also leave a searchable digital trace.

## Results

The online discussions revealed a complexity of reasons to regret parenthood, a variety of regrets and how these feelings were expressed and dealt with. In F1, the thread-starter usually reached out to others in despair, asking for advice on how to move forward with these feelings. In F2 the discussion was usually initiated by a childfree person, which created a different ambiance since the post was more framed as an opinion poll.

Overall, regretting parenthood was seen as a social taboo. Consequently, parents in both forums often described themselves in negative terms, such as *ashamed*, *lousy*, *mean*, *disgusting*, *disturbed*, and *not normal*. They also described that they did their best to behave like a good parent, and ‘keep the facade that everything is good, life is perfect, much like on Facebook’ [mother in F1]. Some wished that they could change, feel differently and enjoy parenthood, while others just tried to accept the situation and reconcile themselves to these emotions. There were also parents who were not much involved in their children’s lives anymore.

Parents wrote that they felt alone with their thoughts and feelings because of the taboo and had not told anyone about them. They feared the reactions from other adults, and were scared that their child would find out how they felt (Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021). Hence, the possibility to share these thoughts anonymously online was appreciated. In the following themes, the various reasons why parents regretted parenthood are described in depth, as well as how regret was framed in relation to reproductive choice and parenthood ideals.

### **Getting off on the wrong foot**

This theme focuses on how parents describe the circumstances surrounding the conception of the child, and how and why they became parents. As in the US study by Moore and Abetz (2019), regretting the circumstances was common. Regret was related to having had children too early in life or too early in the relationship, which was expressed as causing lost opportunities of education or financial/relationship stability. One of the mothers wrote:

I love my son above all else but regret that I had children. The biggest reason is that I was too young, had children and married the wrong guy and now my life sucks [...] I regret that I did not stand on my own two feet first, complete my education, etc. I trusted my husband to take care of things financially but he did not end up doing so. And now it’s really hard!! [...] My son is wonderful, but he deserves a better mother and a better situation than I can give him. Sad but true. There should be a minimum age of 25 to have children. [mother in F1]

This mother stated that her decision to have children was ‘free’ but that her young age had made her *unfit* to make such a decision. Parents like this mother described having a bad conscience about the situation they found themselves in now, since they did not feel able to give their child a good upbringing. They believed that, if they had waited a bit longer before having children, they could have chosen a better partner and become a better parent.

Other users wrote that they became parents without really wanting to. They had felt no urge, parental instinct or ‘biological clock’ telling them to have children. The decision to have children was described as having been taken based on a common ‘truism’: that you cannot not regret having a child, but you can regret having an abortion. Some of them described that they had opted for an abortion but were talked out of this by their partner or family, and then hoped that their child interest/motherly instincts would come with time:

I’m one of those women who regrets having children, deals with it because of peer pressure and society’s brainwashing, and now it’s not possible to give her away. We exist, those who

have realized that this did not actually suit us, and unfortunately our unwanted children are the victims of our ill-considered decisions/persistent pressure from the environment. [mother in F1]

This mother later argues that regret was not really a matter of money, time, career, pregnancy or childbirth to her. Rather, it was simply a matter of longing for a childfree life. Others felt that they had had no say in the decision to become a parent, which made them feel fooled and betrayed:

I hesitated for a long time about having children, was tricked by the bitch into having kids ('I have taken the pill' bullshit). There came three children anyway ... Then I was left, I was kicked out, suddenly on a rainy Sunday you are no longer good enough. There I stood with three children to support and unemployed ... [father in F1]

In these latter cases, the disappointment and regret appears to be on a more existential level, of having made a decision (to become parent) that went against one's true self (Lucas, 2004). What they all express in this theme, however, is that the decision was made without their full control, either because of immaturity or social pressure. All in all, these posts represent several different paths into parenthood that question the image of free reproductive choice.

### ***If I had known then what I know now ...***

This theme focuses on the negative experiences of parenthood, what makes parenthood unbearable and regrettable, and how they handle it. The posts reveal a great variety of experiences, but they centre on how parenthood has limited one's life, how the relationship with the other parent or the children has broken down and/or that parenthood has caused wellbeing issues. Many users stated: 'If I had known then what I know now/if I had to live my life again/with all facts on hand/if I could turn back time ... I would not have had children.' Mothers were quick to add 'I love my children and I would never give them up/I would walk through fire/die for them,' thereby assuring the other users that they were warmhearted, good parents who took care of their children.

### ***Not fitting the role***

Having children was expressed as something that had complicated or limited one's life in an unexpected way. Most users wrote that they had been prepared for parenthood not being easy, but they had never imagined that it would be *so* difficult. Hardships were sometimes aggravated by having been left by a partner, economic problems or disabilities of the child. The parents wrote that they were now drowning in responsibilities and had no time for themselves or to regain strength. A new father in F1 desperately wrote:

You have a lack of sleep, you have to make sure she gets fed, that diapers get changed. She screams and you never know when quiet times will come. Then you are worried all the time and not used to the situation. Every time you lift her up, you kind of think that I must not drop her, keep her neck stable. You do not want to make a mistake there! On top of this, you should be an errand-boy in the home and take care of the girlfriend/household! Then you start thinking about the pressure to become a good father, soon you will also go back to work and bring in money to the house, and then come home and take care of the baby! It's more than I thought! I'm isolated, too, so I'm starting to get depressed as well!

There were mothers who developed their thoughts around parenthood ideals and were critical about what is expected of parents today. A mother in F1 critiqued the motherhood ideal by saying ‘I also love my child but I do not like the role of mother. If I had said that at coffee with other mothers, they would have choked. You should always love being a mother and it is expected that you should love to play and cuddle and it drives me crazy.’ In her case, it seemed to be the idealized mother role and the social control in the mother group that bothered her the most. Both mothers and fathers wrote that they did not ‘fit as parents,’ that parenthood was suffocating them, stressing them out and felt like prison:

I have long regretted having children but tried to think that it will soon get better. But I think it's getting harder and harder ... My partner and mother of the children is not overly happy about parenting either. We do things with the kids and all that stuff so they do not have a bad life. It is probably we parents who have it instead. Or maybe *bad* life is wrong; [it is] *no* life at all. Honestly, I do not understand how anyone can think it's fun to be a parent? [father in F1]

I'm not a child person. I do not enjoy the role of mother, just think it is hard, boring to play and terrible to hear screams and whining. A pure torment. I'm glad that the days go by and that the baby will not always be small. I feel completely alone with these thoughts. Everyone says that you do not regret children and that children are the meaning of life. The pinnacle of life. For me, I have not had worse years than those when I have been a mother. [mother in F1]

These parents clearly articulated an unfulfilled need to be left alone as well as sensory overload, at the same time as feeling isolated. Some of the parents revealed that they had neuropsychiatric diagnoses themselves, which made it harder for them to handle proximity-thirsty, screaming and fighting children (see also Moore & Abetz, 2019). Furthermore, some children were described as having intellectual disabilities that, among other things, made it difficult for parent and child to socialize with friends or other families, which increased the parents' feelings of isolation. Especially mothers expressed that they regretted the way parenthood had changed them into worse people, and how they felt shame in relation to how they behaved and did not live up to the standards of good motherhood.

The knowledge of how things had turned out made parents regret having entered parenthood as such, or regret a specific child or the decision to have more children. When the regret focused on a specific child, it usually had to do with the child being particularly difficult or demanding and that their presence had severely disturbed the dynamics of the family. One parent in F1 wrote:

If I lived my life all over again, I would only have one child, not three as I have today. There are four years between each of my children and they have nothing in common and totally different interests. It is not possible to put that equation together and at the same time be a good parent. On top of that, two of the children have neuropsychiatric diagnoses. Where is my life??? Our life?? [The idea] that the best thing you can give your children is siblings: bullshit!!

Parents regretting having had further children directly or indirectly criticized the ‘sibling norm’, relating their decision to have another child to the social pressure to give the child a sibling. Another less common reason to regret parenthood was feelings of remorse

about bringing children into this world, a world that was described as cruel, sick, overpopulated and doomed. In this, the parents expressed a worry about their children's future wellbeing as well as an envy of childfree people who did not have to worry about such things.

These insights about family norms and parental challenges had come after the children were born, and taken parents by surprise. In that sense, the decision to have children was taken in good faith (Lucas, 2004), and their current situation was hence attributed to unexpected events rather than a failure to make the right decision in the first place.

### *Managing broken relationships*

One important sub-theme to 'how things had turned out' concerned broken relationships. This sub-theme leads us more deeply into how parents manage these feelings and relationships, which also mirrors some contemporary ideals of parenthood vis-à-vis reality.

Regrets regarding the romantic/sexual relationship had two different characteristics. Either parents regretted the person they had children with because they turned out to be a bad person/not fulfilling their responsibilities (the most common), or they missed the old life with the partner and the relationship they had had before the children were born. There were parents (usually mothers) who had been left by their partner, and now had to take most of the childcare responsibilities. They often blamed themselves for having become pregnant with someone they did not know well enough. In other cases, the relationship had been stable initially but then the parents gradually started to disagree and had a hard time sharing child care responsibilities. Some couples had ended their relationship, while others still stuck together:

Having children was the worst decision I have ever made; I regret it every day. Now I am stuck in a dysfunctional relationship because my partner does not have the mental strength to take care of our child. So now there are only 13 years of suffering left. I have regretted that I had children every day for the past five years. Missing everything I had in life before I had children. But I intend to take responsibility and ensure that the child grows up 'good,' so I'll suffer in silence for at least another 10 years. [parent in F2]

Not everyone could afford to be a single parent, and therefore some parents stayed in a bad and sometimes abusive relationship, even though they wanted to separate. The parent in the quote above later expressed an intention to get divorced when the child had grown up. But, of course, being separated could be a strain if it meant taking most of the responsibility for childcare, as this mother explains:

Before, when you were a family, you could work and the man took care of the child or picked them up from preschool. Now I have to run between work, preschool, home and be anxious that you are the parent who picks up your child last, and even combining working hours with the preschool hours is hard. Getting life together is the hardest part. If I'm really sick, I still have to do everything. There is no one else who can take over the fights with my child, I have to fight all the fights myself. So, there is no other parent who can change places with me when it gets hard. That is the most difficult thing. [mother in F1]

To others, separation meant more freedom and a possibility to rest, but when the parents still had to get along and live reasonably close to each other for the sake of the child, it

usually did not mean complete freedom. In Sweden, it is increasingly common after a separation that children live alternately with both parents (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019), which makes demands on cooperation skills. While this arrangement has its benefits, it can also limit a parent's opportunity to move on in life. For example, one father experienced that the situation made it difficult for him to move or date new women:

And just that you get so locked up. Moving elsewhere is a mental impossibility. It feels very inappropriate to break up the child's network of contacts, for example. When you have broken up with the child's mother, you have another load that can be a dealbreaker for many ladies, which has blown some potential relationships. [father in F2]

These examples show how big a part intimate relationships play in the feeling and experience of parenthood regret.

In a few cases, regret was expressed in relation to how the relationship with *the child* had turned out (Garncarek, 2020; Moore & Abetz, 2019). The child could be described as difficult to handle or relate to, and the relationship not becoming as affectionate as expected. The parents described how their feelings for the child had gone numb; they could not see any point in being a parent anymore. A few parents had stopped having contact with the children after the children had moved away from home, but most parents still tried to improve the relationship.

### **Wellbeing issues**

The last sub-theme relates to the embodied aspects of parenthood. Parents expressed how health issues had made parenthood difficult to handle, but also how parenthood itself had caused them health issues. For example, some parents wrote that they had prior mental health issues that had worsened because of parental stress. Others shared that they had developed health or sleeping problems because of pregnancy or childbirth. Sleep deprivation was a recurrent theme in both forums, and it was described as something that drove parents mad.

Another bodily issue, which was only described by mothers, was how the body had changed after pregnancy and childbirth. Mothers described themselves as uglier and how they disliked looking at themselves in the mirror. Furthermore, some were suffering from childbirth injuries that had given them problems with urine leakage and painful vaginal sex, which had had devastating consequences for their wellbeing:

My body is ruined; sagging breasts and stretch marks. But the worst thing is still my genitals; they are so ruined that I leak urine and I cannot have sex. My husband left me because of it, he did not want a woman who cannot have sex. Others I talk to testify to the same things; most who have had children leak urine, one cannot have sex at all due to pain, another can have sex but it hurts but she does it anyway for her husband. I'm single, no man wants me because I cannot have sex and I just long for love, but I will never be able to experience it again. My body and my life are ruined! [mother in F1]

All these embodied issues, usually in combination with a fussy child and not feeling like a successful parent, made these women regret ever having had children. In relation to this, the matter of postpartum depression came up. Some women described how dark thoughts postpartum had made them regret parenthood temporarily, but after treatment (psychological and medical) these feelings had disappeared. To others, the feeling of

regret had remained after the depression, which opened a critique of the social understanding that all mothers who regret parenthood are mentally ill:

I experience that you are often labeled as postpartum depressed because you express your regret. At least that's my experience. If I don't love my child or regret it, then something must be 'wrong with me,' and immediately the thoughts go to depression. But no, I'm not depressed. Just bitter and remorseful. [mother in F1]

One of the mothers who had recovered from depression expressed that she (still) did not fit into the role of a mother because of her unstable and impulsive personality. Another had eventually left the family and moved abroad since her feelings of regret had not passed. She nevertheless encouraged other parents to recover from the depression before making any life-changing decision since, 'only after that can you really know if you really do not want the baby.' Although less common, there were also fathers who mentioned feeling depressed, as seen in the earlier quote from the overwhelmed new father.

## Discussion

In this material on parenthood regret, several expectations of parenthood have been explicitly or implicitly formulated, including ideals of gender- equal, child-centered and involved parenthood (Forsberg, 2009), and parenthood as joyful and rewarding. When several of the expectations remain unfulfilled and parenthood feels overwhelming, parents feel trapped and unable to improve their situation. The hardships of parenthood exceed the rewards and joys. Thus the longing to go back in time and make a different decision arises (Garncarek, 2020; Matley, 2020; Moore & Abetz, 2019; Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021). The decisions they wished they could change align very well with the choices that young adults today face in their reproductive decision-making process; *if, when, how, how many* or *with whom* they should have children. In one way, it then makes perfect sense that some parents regret having children since childbirth is increasingly regarded as a choice (or rather, several choices) and not just a given. But the material also demonstrates how the freedom of choice is in fact limited, that people are not always rational subjects, and that even deliberate choices do not protect you from unexpected negative consequences. We can also see how important intimate relationships and bodily factors are to the experience of parenthood.

Although the material spans almost two decades, it does not display apparent attitude shifts about mothering and fathering over time. This confirms that the family- friendly policies and ideals in Sweden have a long, stable history, but also that traditional parental roles persist. The long history of family- friendly and gender- equal policies is reflected on a linguistic level. Hardly anyone talks about themselves as 'mother' or 'father,' instead choosing the gender-neutral terms 'parent' and 'parenthood'. This strengthens the image and expectation of parenthood in Sweden of being gender neutral, which is likely an effect of the gender-equal family policies and the generally pervasive equality discourse. There is also very little direct talk in the online forums about family policies and benefits available to parents and children. Public childcare is sometimes mentioned in negative terms; that it is stressful to take children to and from preschool, and how mothers feel ashamed when being the last parent to pick up their kids after work. Still, the discussions

reveal that childcare support is expected from the state rather than from family and friends. As a consequence, the nuclear family becomes quite isolated and parenthood is described as a highly individualized experience, and, to many, also very lonesome.

When scrutinizing what parenthood entails to mothers and fathers in the Swedish context, we can see that there are gender differences in how parenthood is performed and experienced. Overall, it is foremost mothers who express regret online, possibly because they are still more affected (physically, mentally, socially and economically) by parenthood than fathers. It is also more common for women to reach out and seek advice about family issues. When it comes to the circumstances around conception, my first theme, some mothers and fathers write about having become parents (semi-) involuntary. However, while mothers write about having been socially pressured by the collective into wanting children, fathers write about having been tricked into parenthood by an individual woman. Although both mothers and fathers articulate disappointment with their (ex-) partners, fathers are more prone to express themselves in an aggressive way, calling the mother things like ‘cow,’ ‘bitch,’ ‘psychopath,’ or ‘devil’ (see also Moore & Abetz, 2019). Interestingly, the fathers do not express regret about not having taken responsibility themselves for contraception, which reveals gendered expectations regarding who is responsible for preventing an unwanted pregnancy (Ekstrand et al., 2007).

As parenthood continues, some parents express how parenthood has made it difficult to get an education, a good job, a stable economic situation and a stable romantic relationship. This goes for mothers as well as fathers, but the consequences are different. While financial instability often leads to mothers staying on parental leave longer (than they wish) and taking major responsibility for childcare, fathers continue to work, since it is believed that the family’s finances would crash if the father stays home. These stories display a traditional division of childcare at odds with the Swedish gender equality ideal and welfare policies. However, it aligns with previous studies showing that fathers with low education and income and/or precarious positions, or self-employment (including those with a high income), take less parental leave than highly educated, middle-class fathers with permanent positions (Månsdotter et al., 2010). Månsdotter et al. argue that this pattern is linked to economic rationality but also different concepts of masculinity. Parental leave can be perceived as a threat to, just as well as a marker of, masculinity depending on social group.

As for mothers, several had expected that they should enjoy being on maternity leave, but instead felt bored, exhausted or dissatisfied, and longed to go back to work. Hence, the ideal of maternity leave (as joyful and shimmering) clashed with the women’s true experiences. This is one of the things that studies on regret have in common across cultures; the crack in the image of holy motherhood. What makes the Swedish case a little different is that parenthood was rarely described as *intensive* in the exact way that Hays (1996) has defined ‘intensive mothering’ (putting the children’s needs first and investing most of one’s time, labour, emotion, intellect and money in the children). This might partly be a result of the family friendly policies and benefits, which enables most parents to obtain paid parental leave followed by highly subsidized formal childcare when going back to work. Still, there were many posts, from both mothers and fathers, describing parenthood as overwhelming and stressful, and how they had not expected it to be *that* hard. Fathers who tried to share childcare and household duties

equally with the mother described how they suffered from childcare chaos and fatigue in similar ways as mothers. These men seem to have identified with the ideal of the ‘new father’; someone who is doing what is traditionally perceived as mothering, but who is also equally responsible for the family finances (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Forsberg, 2009). The child-centered way of fathering stands out as the norm, also after parental separation (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). What this study thus highlights is that being an involved parent with high egalitarian values, who works full time with good access to formal childcare *but* little informal support, is quite challenging.

The parallel narrative of fathers who have left all responsibilities to the mother is, however, also available, especially in F2 where it seems to pass without question.

Hence, according to my interpretation, two quite different images of masculinity dominate in fathers’ accounts: the sensitive, involved father who, in despair, seeks parenthood advice online to cope and become a better parent (mainly present in F1); and the insensitive, either distant or present but (passive-) aggressive father, with slightly older children, who despises the mother (since he feels betrayed by her) and sometimes also the children (since they drive him mad). This second category of fathers do not seem overwhelmed with childcare duties. Instead, they more often bring up financial concerns as a problem, again mirroring how the bread winning responsibility is frequently perceived as the father’s issue (Moore & Abetz, 2019). At the same time, the material also shows how men distance themselves from the reproductive decision-making process.

### ***The online forum as a venue for confirming or negotiating norms***

That the material reveals different ways of performing masculinity can partly be related to the different communication styles expected in the different forums, with F2 often being a venue for controversial and, for example, anti-feminist sentiments. Since most posts in F1 were labeled ‘sensitive issue,’ meaning that other users had to respond in a respectful and supporting way, posts were usually longer and more nuanced in F1. In F2, users usually responded to a call, which led to short, frank confessions and the posts were more declarative. Users of F2 seldom asked each other follow-up questions, while users of F1 (foremost women) posed questions about child care support, relationship issues, contact with health care, etc. I interpret that users of F1 were more invested in managing emotions and in self-reflexivity than users of F2. Even though men are increasingly expected to be involved parents, different expectations of mothers and fathers still exist, which is reflected by the quantity of the posts made by mothers as well as their content. Mothers are more invested in presenting themselves as self-reflexive subjects and good parents, despite their feelings of regret, and stand out as more burdened by the embodied aspects of childbirth.

Mothers who seem to value gender equality often express that they felt trapped in an unexpected and unwanted traditional gender role as mothers, and criticize social structures (see also Garncarek, 2020; Matley, 2020; Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021). In these women’s accounts, I see self-blame and shame when they compare themselves to other, more successful mothers but also agency and critique towards societal norms. As in the study by Mackenzie (2019), mothers use online forums to position themselves in specific gendered ways, and negotiate parenthood in relation to individuality. Mackenzie argues that mothers’ negative emotions towards motherhood can be interpreted as

resistance against gendered expectations of parenthood. Similarly, mothers in my material clearly position themselves as opponents of pronatalist ideals and the two-child-norm, and they blame their situation on social pressure and brainwashing. What they regret is that they did not see these social structures before they got pregnant. They seldom write about having lost the opportunity of a career, but they expected to be more free as mothers and to share the burdens of parenthood more equally with their partner. Without explicitly talking about gender equality policies, these mothers reveal that what is expected is the possibility of a work-life balance: to combine involved parenthood with paid work as well as things like physical activity and a social life with friends. Not being able to achieve this leads to feelings of entrapment, and at times to burnout (Roskam et al., 2022).

There are women who seem to have joined the online discussion to inspire other women to leave more childcare responsibility to the father and confirm that it is okay that mothers invest more time in their own well being. Some of these women also criticize how regret is confused with depression (see also Sihto & Mustosmäki, 2021), which I interpret as resistance towards the pathologizing of mothers who do not enjoy caregiving or involved parenthood. Another interesting thing that happens in the forums is that parents complain about their child's behaviour or personality. It is done in a way that probably would have delegitimized them as good parents (Westberg, 2016) if it had been done offline. It is thus clear that online forums enable people to express themselves in socially non-normative ways (Mackenzie, 2019; Moore & Abetz, 2019). Although there is a risk for harsh critique from others, users can protect themselves behind their anonymity and maintain the facade 'in real life'. Consequently, to most women, leaving the family (partly or fully) seems unthinkable. They often express that they love their child/children and will fulfill their parental responsibility despite the hardships.

I would say that there is no strong critique of or resistance on display against 'involved parenting' as such, just that responsibilities should be more equally shared between parents. Only one mother in F1 wrote, in a very relaxed way, about how she is refusing to be an involved mother and has left most of the childcare responsibilities to the father. She appears to be fully comfortable with being the laid-back parent in the family, focusing more on herself and her romantic relationship than the children. Her posts were met with astonishment, which is not a surprise considering that this mother appears as quite unique in her way of doing parenthood, a way that more resembles traditional fatherhood.

Another gender difference worthy of note is that mothers often describe parenthood as an embodied/health experience, as they refer to, for example, feeding practices, leaking bodies and postpartum depression. Both mothers and fathers stated that they had less sex than they wanted because of tiredness or lack of time, but mothers also had less sex because it was painful due to child birth injuries. Hence, the negative impacts of reproduction on women's bodies became part of the reasons to regret parenthood. Bodily issues have not been much discussed in previous studies, although Moore and Abetz (2019) mentioned that some parents regretted how their *partner's* body or sexual drive had changed in a negative way after having children. The results reveal an expectation of women's bodies to be undamaged by childbirth, and that an intact body and libido are essential to the well being of the romantic relationship postpartum. The posts about childbirth injuries can, however, also be interpreted as political. The openness

about dyspareunia in Swedish forums should be seen in the context of an ongoing debate in social media about women's sexual and reproductive health, following #MeToo as well as the maternity care appeal (*Barnmorskeupproret*), where both parents and health care professionals for several years have protested against cuts in maternity care services and demanded more financial investments to safeguard women's (and children's) health. The embodied and political aspects of regret should be further explored in future studies.

To answer the questions outlined in the introduction, this study shows that Swedish mothers and fathers express regret for similar reasons (entrapment, overload, role conflicts, disappointments) as parents in other Western contexts, despite having strong reproductive rights, good access to formal child support and high gender equality on a societal level. One explanation could be related to what Roskam et al. (2022) recently suggested, that the high expectations of gender- equal parenthood are unmet in reality. Another reason could be the difficulty of combining involved parenting with gainful employment and other social activities, without much informal support. By including fathers' perspectives, the study shows that men also struggle with this issue, albeit still to a lesser degree.

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