

# Chaos ruined the children's sleep, diet and behaviour: Gendered discourses on family life in pandemic times

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This study adopts a feminist critical approach to explore how parenting was understood during the COVID-19 restrictive measures in Iceland. Iceland has been known as a front runner in gender equality, and women's participation in the workforce is high. Data consists of 97 stories that were collected during the peak of COVID-19 in April 2020 using the story completion method. The stories were thematically analysed. Most of the participants were university-educated women. The themes demonstrate the power of neoliberal discourses in framing parenting. Parenting during a pandemic, especially mothering, is constructed as an overwhelming project that requires detailed organization and management. There is also resistance to neoliberal governmentality through redefining successful parenthood. Furthermore, the gendered nature of domestic work is questioned, especially the traditional, inactive father who prioritizes his own needs only to fail comically in the domestic sphere. The study contributes to our understanding of gendered parenthood in neoliberal, pandemic times.

## KEYWORDS

COVID-19, motherhood, neoliberal governmentality, parental practices, story completion

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In February 2020, the worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 reached Iceland. The authorities reacted swiftly with aggressive testing, tracking and containment measures, and a national emergency was declared between 25 March

and 4 May. Icelandic authorities did not impose a full lockdown, but there was a ban on gathering of more than 20 people during this time (a semi-lockdown). Many workplaces were closed, and primary schools only ran at limited capacity with much emphasis on homework. Icelanders were encouraged to shelter at home, which made the home not just the primary hub for the family but also for work. In other words, these were unprecedented times that disrupted the routines of family life and work and exposed the structural backbones that make modern family life possible.

In this article, we adopt a feminist perspective to look at gendered representations of working parents during the peak COVID-19 restrictions in Iceland. Our data consists of texts collected with the story completion method (Braun et al., 2019) that provide insight into how parenting was made sense of during this time. In our study, we unpack what parental qualities are seen as essential for dealing with this crisis and how they draw on discourses of gender. The article is a contribution to the growing literature on the dynamics of gender and family life during COVID-19 (Clancy, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020) and sheds light on 21<sup>st</sup>-century constructions of gendered, middle-class parenthood in neoliberal times. More specifically, we ask: How are the demands that parents face regarding child-rearing and domestic life in pandemic times described? What coping mechanisms do the protagonists in the stories use? How do the participants write about gender relations while parenting in a pandemic?

We argue that Iceland provides an interesting setting for this study as it has a well-entrenched welfare system in terms of childcare, which has made it possible to combine parenting with paid employment. It has also embraced neoliberal ideas which see child-rearing as an individual responsibility and enterprise (Auðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir, forthcoming; Clancy, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020; McRobbie, 2013). Before we present our study, we discuss the discursive context around parenting in Iceland.

## 2 | NEOLIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY AND GENDERED PATTERNS OF PARENTHOOD

In Iceland, the working mother is the norm. In 2018, the birth rate in Iceland was 1.7 children per woman (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018b), and 82 per cent of women were in the labour market. This is the highest proportion of female workforce participation in all OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018a). In the last decades, fathers' involvement in parenting has been encouraged with increased rights to parental leave, among other things (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gíslason, 2013; Einarsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2011), and research with young men suggests they see fatherhood as an integral part of masculinity (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Furthermore, thanks to pressure from feminist movements, families in Iceland have access to reliable and affordable day care, and schooldays for older children are continuous.

Yet, in Iceland, as in other western countries, motherhood has been considered to be integral to feminine identities (Arendell, 2000; Kawash, 2011; Rúdólfsdóttir, 1997, 2016). Historically, maternal selflessness that focused on the care and nurturing of others in the private sphere was considered the proper route for women's fulfilment and happiness (Rúdólfsdóttir, 1997). Despite affordable day care, women's participation in the workforce being the norm and policies emphasizing fathers' involvement, Icelandic mothers are still expected to shoulder the main responsibility for childcare (Júlíusdóttir, Rafnsdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2018; Símonardóttir, 2016). In Pétursdóttir's (2009) study, mothers explained how their disproportionate workload in the home was due to their choices. They also buy into the post-feminist ideologies promoted in western societies where inequality is seen as a historical rather than a current problem (McRobbie, 2009).

This is in line with how neoliberalism as a form of governmentality makes people as individuals responsible for making the right, often high-stakes, choices (Pattillo, Delale-O'Connor, & Butts, 2014) for their and their families' daily life and success (Güney-Frahm, 2020; McRobbie, 2013; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016). The project of the individual is then to perfectly invent their 'best self', through entrepreneurship and choices (McRobbie, 2015), and the family

plays a special role in training children to make the most of themselves and become good citizens (Rose, 1989). This then begets competitiveness and undermines collective and structural thought and solutions.

Neoliberal governmentality has had a profound influence on western parental practices (Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016), and its primary focus is on the professional middle-class mother (McRobbie, 2013). Mothers are expected to be conscious consumers who maximize their children's potential through a calculated and informed choice in a 'market' of schools and leisure programmes (Auðardóttir & Kosunen, 2020; Olmedo & Wilkins, 2016; Reay, 1998). In this sense, maternal practices in Iceland, as well as in other affluent countries, have moved beyond 'providing food, shelter, and love' (Vincent, 2017, p. 543). The increased emphasis on parental educative work is an aspect of this development that has been documented throughout affluent countries in the world (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; Vincent, 2017), including the Nordic countries (Helgøy & Homme, 2017; Jónsdóttir, 2013; Kristoffersson, 2009; Magnúsdóttir, 2013).

The maternal labour of educative work adds a fourth shift to days that are already packed with demands from paid labour, domestic work and their own education (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). Not only are mothers expected to enhance their children's academic achievements, they also must cook healthy, clean and organic food from scratch (Cairns, Johnston, & MacKendrick, 2013) and monitor their children's use of free time and screens (Wheeler, 2014). Parenting is wrought with risk and anxiety, as wrong parenting practices may irrevocably harm the child or cause downward social mobility. These trends are gendered and intimately connected to the social construction of the responsible mother (Vincent, 2010, 2017; Wheeler, 2014). Furthermore, it has been well documented that women's access to resources to fulfil the demands of the active and involved parent are contingent upon their societal status, in particular, but not exclusively, their social class (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2005).

We anticipated that, with the halt of day care services, the mothers' fourth shifts become heavier burdens. We must also ask how the acceptable ways to feel and deal with these tensions are constructed. Postfeminist neoliberal governmentality calls for a cultivation of the 'right kind of dispositions' in the face of adversity or challenge. These include aspiration, confidence, positivity and resilience (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Gill, 2017; Illouz, 2007). Feelings of anger, insecurity and frustration are replaced with the feeling rules of post-feminist neoliberal culture such as humour and positive thinking that ensure you cultivate and present the best version of yourself (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Elias & Gill, 2018; Gill, Kelan, & Scharff, 2017). In this regard, Cappellini, Harman, Marilli, and Parsons (2019) have theorized how the emphasis on optimism and positivity, what they refer to as an optimistic affective regime, negatively affects mothers and results in stress and anxiety.

The COVID-19 pandemic gives us a unique opportunity to examine the tensions described above. The pandemic has brought to light the importance of the care work that is mostly in the hands of women (Bahn, Cohen, & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2020). Scholars predict that the pandemic will have a disproportionately negative effect upon women's workload in the home, but there are also speculations that it might force men to shoulder more responsibilities (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020). A survey on the gendered division of childcare in Iceland during the COVID-19 semi-lockdown showed that 42 per cent of women who work for the state or a municipality stayed at home with their children whereas only 30 per cent of men did so (BSRB – The Federation of State and Municipal Employees, 2020). This further highlights how important it is to examine the gendered discourses of family life during these times.

### 3 | METHODS

As we were interested in the knowledge frameworks participants draw on when making sense of how parents engage in parenting practices during a time of crises such as COVID-19, we decided to use the story completion method (Clarke, Braun, Frith, & Moller, 2019) and a comparative design. The story completion method asks participants to complete a story based on a story stem. The stories are fictional but require the participants to draw on

their knowledge, ideas and values about the topic in question. The stories thus cannot be presumed to be descriptions of actual events, but they do provide insight into the cultural discourses available to the participants' understanding of the topic. Their value also lies in that they do not demand participants express socially desirable viewpoints as participants are not asked to describe their own views or lives (Clarke et al., 2019). In addition, the story completion method is suitable for studies on sensitive matters (Clarke et al., 2019) such as equality and gendered dimensions of family life.

Participants were directed to a webpage where they were randomly assigned a story stem. In the story stems, the main protagonist was either Karl (a father) or Anna (a mother). The participants were asked to provide stories in response to the story stem, but how they did so was left open. The story stem and instructions were as follows:

*Anna/Karl has two compulsory school aged children (6–16 years). After a ban on mass gatherings, she/he receives an announcement from the school that her/his children will only spend 2 hours every other day at school. Shortly afterwards, the children's teacher sends ideas for assignments for the children to work on at home.*

Describe the next few days in the life of Anna/Karl. You can have the following questions in mind if you like: How does she/he feel? What does she/he do with the assignments from the teachers? Does she/he have a spouse? How is family life going? Does she/he work? How does she/he balance work and private life?

When the participants had completed their stories, they were asked to respond to two questions: the first was what kind of a parent is Anna/Karl. The next was whether Anna/Karl had a paid job, and if so what kind of an employee is she/he? They were then asked to give some background information on themselves.

### 3.1 | Recruitment, data and background information

The participants were recruited through ads posted in Icelandic Facebook groups with high number of members, such as Work with Short Notice (58,700 members) and Stuff for Free (108,000 members),<sup>1</sup> that are known to be very active and have a relaxed policy about advertising. A total of 97 participants completed a story during 7–24 April. The total word count of the analysed material is 32,779. The stories ranged in word count from 68 to 1461 words, with an average of 335 words. Overall, 82 per cent of our participants were women, 14 per cent men and 3 per cent gender queer. Seventy-eight per cent had a university degree and 82 per cent were aged from 18 to 50 years old. Only 9 per cent of respondents reported difficulties in making ends meet. All instructions and study material were in Icelandic, making it safe to assume that the participants have lived in Iceland for long enough to know the language well. The Reykjavík central area is overrepresented with 45 per cent of the participants<sup>2</sup> versus an expected rate of 15 per cent. Reflective thematic analysis was carried out to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017). We read the data closely, coded it in line with our research questions, paid special attention to how the themes linked with dominant gendered discourses and reflected on the knowledge frameworks that made them possible.

## 4 | FINDINGS

The coding of the data yielded five themes that we will discuss and analyse in the following sections. As most of the participants were young or middle-aged university-educated women, the following themes give insight into how they perceive and understand the demands society puts on mothers.

1. *The organized, involved and neat parent.* In this theme, we explore the demands that neoliberal governmentality puts on the shoulders of parents
2. *Discipline and positivity.* This theme analyses how acceptable ways of coping with parenting during a pandemic are constructed
3. *Breaking down or resisting the societal pressures of good parenting.* This theme covers those who do not cope with the demands of self-discipline and/or positivity. Instead, they either resist the demands or break down
4. *COVID-19 as a lesson to the clueless father.* The last theme focuses on the reoccurring descriptions of the clueless father who is taught a lesson by the lockdown

#### 4.1 | The organized, involved and neat parent: Manifestations of neoliberal parental demands

Being a parent who has to make decisions about how to deal with conflicting demands was a unifying narrative throughout most of the stories. The stories describe how the virus and the breakdown of school services that followed the partial lockdown in Iceland escalated the demands on parents. Most of the stories revolve around the competing demands of paying attention to a paid job and parenting children. This theme identifies the participants' reflections on what it means to be a good and responsible parent.

In the stories, good parents are good planners. They do not idly waste time that could be used to attend to their children's education, health (exercise) and home lives. As demands on parents' time intensify, they have to schedule in the different tasks and simply be more efficient. This is in line with neoliberal ideas about parents as managers of their children's lives (Reay, 2005). In the stories, particularly those about mothers, the idea that children's needs should be prioritized above paid work comes across clearly. This theme is not surprising, as we already know that, in most affluent countries, motherhood now entails countless duties that include overseeing the children's academic progress and responsible school, neighbourhood, food, friend and extra-curricular activity choices (Vincent, 2017). The following are some examples of how these duties materialized in the data. The organized parent made thorough daily plans that usually included schoolwork.

*The children need order and security during these strange times. She [Anna] sets up a daily planner, a timetable of sorts. There is 'school' from 8 to 12 where they are supposed to do a variety of schoolwork and work on the assignments from the teachers. Anna sits with her children while they do the homework, both to ensure that they do the work and that they get the help they need. (Woman, 31–40 years, vocational education)*

The good parent is not only organized but also heavily involved in the schoolwork itself.

*Karl puts great emphasis on the education of Lisa and Guðrún, and they always sit together at the kitchen table to study every day for 2–3 hours. (Gender queer, 18–30 years, matriculation exam)*

However, some of the plans were made as a reaction to the chaos and frustration that had been boiling up in the first few days of the semi-lockdown and were centred around sleep and meals rather than schoolwork.

*Karl didn't like how chaos had ruined the children's sleep, diet and behaviour in only three days, so he planned how, when they woke up, they would eat breakfast, lunch and dinner together. He also made plans for a family activity every evening of the week that included crafts, boardgames or watching a movie. (Woman, 51–60 years, undergraduate degree)*

One of the main points of tension in the stories was the competing demands of child-rearing and paid work. Several participants felt the need to emphasize how responsible parents prioritize the needs of the children above the needs of paid work, particularly in the stories about Anna.

*She doesn't live for her work although she is conscientious and realistic. The family matters more to her.* (Woman, 31–40 years, master's degree)

*Karl is a good father. He prioritizes the children above his work and wants all the best for them.* (Woman, 18–30 years, undergraduate degree)

Other predominant demands that became visible through the stories, were exercise and outdoor play and how the family home had to be neat and clean. A good parent runs an efficient home, which can be seen through its neatness and cleanliness (Nathanson, 2013). Although this theme was evident in stories about both Karl and Anna, it was much more common in Anna's stories, suggesting that it is easier for people to imagine a mother taking care of these duties than a father.

*When Anna is finished managing all the schoolwork, she pulls out the yoga mats for herself and the children. They do some yoga and relaxation.* (Woman, 41–50 years, undergraduate degree)

Housework was seen as a particularly demanding job that was often neglected due to the strains of organizing children's schoolwork and Anna's paid work. While some stories had successful accounts of people juggling schoolwork, exercise and paid work, housework was almost exclusively mentioned in a negative manner and mostly in the stories about Anna.

*Breakfast, lunch, dinner and countless small snacks in the kitchen cause the mountain of dirty dishes to be almost unbearable [for Anna] at the end of the day.* (Woman, 18–30 years, undergraduate degree)

*She spends most evenings floundering about, trying to finish everything that needs to be done – the laundry, the dirty dishes and the last emails.* (Woman, 18–30 years, undergraduate degree)

Overall, our data described people coping or not coping with inhumane demands. They are the product of a society that, during COVID-19, placed excessive demands on parents, in particular working mothers.

## 4.2 | Discipline and positivity: The acceptable ways of coping

This theme describes the possible and acceptable ways of coping with the demands described above. In the stories, the COVID-19 semi-lockdown was a type of acid test that distinguished between capable and incapable parents. The parent who is capable is described as being so by nature and as having shown these qualities before the pandemic. She or he is super organized and shows remarkable resilience and stamina. The capable parent responds to a situation of crises without ever breaking.

*She is used to starting the day early. Before the lockdown, she always went to the gym at 6 am. Now, when the children wake up at 10 am and finish having breakfast, Anna has already done four hours of work.* (Woman, 41–50 years, undergraduate degree)

*Anna is firm when it comes to the children going to sleep at 7.30 pm – because then she has to work. A four-hour session every night while this pandemic lasts, but that will have to do. (Woman, 41–50 years, undergraduate degree)*

These stories echo a neoliberal discourse of resilience and personal stamina (Gill, 2017) which is particularly applied to the working mother who is juggling childcare and paid work.

The capable parent is not only disciplined but also adopts a positive attitude. There are frequent references to positivity and gratitude in the stories, which are linked to the neoliberal governmentality of emotions (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Illouz, 2007) where happiness, positivity and gratitude are considered the correct and respectable feelings in the face of adversity. No matter what, the parent never loses his or her composure and oozes positivity.

*The stress has taken its toll on the family. However, Karl manages to stay grateful. (Woman, 41–50 years, undergraduate degree)*

*Anna makes the best out of the situation and focuses on positivity when interacting with the children. (Woman, 31–40 years, matriculation exam)*

*Karl and his wife see that the lockdown will be difficult for the family, but they decide to be positive about the situation. (Woman, 18–30 years, matriculation exam)*

*They [the family] had a good time together. Even if the news was a bit scary with high numbers of sick and dying people, they focused on the numbers about people that are recovering or healed. (Woman, 31–40 years, matriculation exam)*

*Karl was sometimes bored and missed the company of adults, but he was also very happy and grateful for being able to spend time with his children. (Woman, 51–60 years, undergraduate degree)*

In many of these quotes, being grateful and positive are Anna's or Karl's deliberate decisions rather than simply descriptions of their innate characters. Positivity is presented as a useful way to cope with difficult circumstances or feelings such as boredom.

However, we encountered one account, written by a woman lawyer in her 20s, who actively makes her protagonist acknowledge how difficult the demand on happiness and positivity can be.

*It echoes throughout society that families should just be positive and enjoy themselves. But, it is easier said than done. Anna can't wait for things to go back to normal. She loves her children and her family, but it is difficult to constantly enjoy every moment. She is afraid to admit those feelings to herself, let alone to others, because she feels that everybody else is coping so well with the situation. (Woman, 18–30 years, master's degree)*

It is interesting that the participant decides, in the middle of her criticism of positivity culture, to reiterate that Anna loves her children and her family. This suggests that positivity and enjoyment are such strong discursive demands that a failure to meet them risks sending the message that you do not love your children or your family. This quote also serves as a reminder that romanticizing the COVID-19 lockdown by emphasizing the possibilities for joy, gratitude, positivity and intimacy is a privilege, in particular class privilege.

The demand to cultivate the self (Gill, 2017; Rose, 1989) presents the most privileged parents as an example for others to follow (Gewirtz, 2001). The emotional ramifications of these discourses are subtly suggested in the storyteller's 'everybody else is coping so well', and Anna seems to be left with feelings of shame and isolation.

### 4.3 | To break down or to resist societal pressures on good parenting

In our data, those who do not cope with the demands of self-discipline and/or positivity have two options, they can resist the demands or break down. A break down for a parent is usually manifested in a dirty house and children glued to TV or computer screens and/or showing disruptive behaviour, all signs that the parent has lost control. These stories had sad endings for Anna/Karl, who were guilt-ridden and tired.

*Anna stood up to get some more coffee when she heard that the children were bickering. She stepped over a house of Lego's and slipped past a fortress made of a doll stroller, chairs and blankets in the living room. She moved the pile of laundry and told the children to sit on the couch and put a Disney movie on. At least now she would be able to work for 60 min. 'They can do their math assignments later' she thought to herself. (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

*Anna was tired and irritated and felt shame over not being able to attend to her children's needs. (Woman, 51–60 years, master's degree)*

Guilt and shame linger as the mother is not able to maintain a healthy diet, a clean house and academically active children.

There is a gendered pattern in our stories where this guilt is more present in Anna's stories. The failing father's feelings are not described, and they tend to fail less often as they are less likely to be presented as striving for a perfect parenthood. We see a similar pattern emerge in our data as Cappellini et al. (2019), where the neoliberal post-feminist demand of a concerted, happy, optimistic and disciplined self, results in unsustainable constructions of what is a good and worthy life for women as mothers. When women fail, they internalize their failure which results in shame and guilt. Structural issues are transformed into personal matters that require personal solutions.

In their stories, our participants are in dialogue with the image of the efficient, perfect mother whose standards prove to be unattainable by Anna. The perfect mother is symbolized with the presence of Helga in the quote below. However, there are some reservations about Helga's perfectness, because she only *seems* to have it all under control, a subtle criticism of this imaginary perfect mother.

*The children lose their tempers and start fighting. Anna doesn't get any chance to work. At 12:30 pm, the house is a mess; the TV is on and both children are using their iPads. I will try again tomorrow, Anna thinks to herself. She feels shame over not being able to handle this situation better like Helga who put a photo on social media this morning. Helga seems to have it all under control – the housework and the children's homework! (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

It is noteworthy that this is a story of comparison between two women, Anna, our protagonist, and Helga. McRobbie (2015) argues that the gendered relations of neoliberal governmentality create tensions and competition between women, here mothers, where perfectionism is the goal. By directing women into competition with each other rather than encouraging comparison between mothers and fathers, male dominance stays intact.

Cappellini et al. (2019) note that the demands that neoliberal governmentality puts on mothers are unmanageable and call for a new conceptualization of the good life. A number of our participants chose to do this and wrote about resisting those demands. The resistance usually happens after the parent has tried and failed to maintain a daily schedule of academic activities, diet and discipline. These stories present an active stance against the unsustainable construction of a good and worthy life that post-feminist and neoliberal discourses present as so enticing.



*They [Karl and his wife] allow the children to spend way too much time playing videogames and can only hope that some of them teach some skills. The home is more at peace when the children are allowed to organise their time themselves – as long as meals and bedtime are taken care of. Somehow, they start liking this new reality.... The family finds serenity and love while the world outside seems to be falling apart. (Woman, 41–50 years, master's degree)*

*The more stressed out she was about everyone, in particular she, herself, having to do well in every aspect, the worse things got. They did not feel good at all. Total chaos, crisps in front of the TV at noon on a Tuesday and everybody was irritated.... She tried to make peace and to give everybody some slack, especially herself.... So what if everybody seemed to be re-organising the closets and mastering sourdough baking? Her family just needed to relax in their pyjamas. (Woman, 18–30 years, master's degree)*

Our participants offer a new definition of a good mother, happiness and success. Under these new definitions, serenity, love and relaxing in pyjamas epitomize successful family life as opposed to the ideas of structure, discipline and academic ambition in which neoliberal governmentality wants us to invest.

Again, we see the presence of a comparison to the perfect benchmark (McRobbie, 2015) where everybody is doing so well. Here, this perfect benchmark is contested. So what if everybody seems to be coping? Through this resistance, Anna is able to avoid feelings of guilt and shame over her failures. In these stories Anna and Karl strive to make peace and cut the family some slack. Interestingly, while Anna's story above presents her thoughts in the first person and her husband is absent, Karl's story puts forth his and his wife's thoughts on the issue. In both excerpts, a mother's perspective is in the foreground. This further underscores the storytellers' familiarity with a culture where the mother is the main caretaker of the children and the home and is the prime target of neoliberal discourses of family life.

#### 4.4 | The pandemic as a lesson for the clueless father

On the whole, our stories are somewhat more likely to present Anna, Karl's wife or other women in Karl's life, such as a sister, as the main caretaker of the children and the house while Karl helps out, indicating his secondary position in the home.

*Most of the time, Karl's wife does most of the work related to the kids, although he does take some part of it. (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

*Karl's wife does most of the work related to the kids' homework, grocery shopping and cooking because of Karl's working hours. But he helps when he is at home. (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

In some of the stories that exemplify exceptions to this, Anna is a front-line worker such as a nurse who must work long hours, Karl's wife is dead (two stories) or Karl is married to a man who is the main breadwinner (one story). Thus, the presence of a female caretaker is deliberately explained away in the stories to make space for Karl or Anna's husband to take on the main responsibility. In those instances, Karl steps up and takes on the responsibilities usually delegated to women.

*Karl likes his job most of the time, but his work is not a priority because he has realised that the children needed to be prioritised after his wife, the mother of his children, died in a car crash. (Woman, 51–60 years, undergraduate degree)*

*Karl is relieved that he has been a stay-at-home father for the last few years as his husband has a high enough income to support the family alone. (Woman, 18–30 years, undergraduate degree)*

This suggests that the women writing the stories are conscious of their societal roles as the main caretakers of children and housework. This is in line with research that shows that, even in a country that has been branded as the most gender equal (Einarsdóttir, 2020) and where policies are in place to encourage fathers to be involved in the children's upbringing, women are still expected to be the primary caretakers (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018; Símonardóttir, 2016).

A clueless or indifferent father (Karl/Anna's husband) who does not realize what it takes to run a home recurs in the stories. During the lockdown, they have to take on more of the domestic duties, and this sometimes causes strain in the family.

*Karl is a caring parent. He is, however, dealing with a new reality because his wife has done most of the work related to the children and the home. He has taken some part, but his wife has been the overseer. (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

*Selma says that this is not working out anymore. He [Karl] must pay attention to the children's homework because the school is closed, but assignments keep piling up in Google docs. Karl agrees but is always at his computer, always working, and doesn't have the time to pay attention to the family. This creates tension between Karl and Selma. (Woman, 61–70 years, PhD degree)*

*Karl uses noise cancelling headphones a lot to ensure that he gets left alone to do his work. Soon, he finds that the children are asking their mother for help way more often than they ask him. He and his wife discuss this fact and his wife asks him to be more responsive. (Woman, 31–40 years, master's degree)*

The first and the last excerpts feature the overseeing mother that was present in many of the stories. The father is clueless at first and he changes his ways only after his wife confronts him.

These stories are in a dialogue with a public discourse that increasingly emphasizes the involved and caring father. Despite men taking on fewer responsibilities in the home than women, scholars have noted that in the Nordic countries the constructions of masculinities are increasingly linked to the caring father (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Our participants' emphasis on making COVID-19 teach the uninvolved father a lesson suggests that there might be a gap between the imagery of the caring Nordic father and the lived reality faced by the participants who wrote the stories. The irritation and need to address the uninvolved father is embedded in this gap.

In some cases, the stories featuring a clueless father are intentionally sarcastic.

*Karl spends the first day closed off in his home-office. He is excited for the clock to turn 18.30 because he knows that is when dinner will be served. When he comes out of his office, he sees that Kristín, his wife, is a bit tired, but he doesn't understand why since she has only been attending to the kids.... He is envious of Kristín because she can have cosy days with the kids and attend to her job on her computer when the kids are busy with homework. He sometimes wishes that his life was as simple as hers. (Woman, 41–50 years, PhD degree)*

Irony and sarcasm are known as rhetorical devices for portraying a critical stance in situations of unequal power relations (Fernandez & Huber, 2001). In these cases, irony can serve as a tool to point out power structures and to speak up about realities that are contested by those in power (Chock, 2001). Here, a critical stance is taken against the traditional male breadwinner who doesn't share the household duties with his wife.

Another example from our data is the following story that described a very hectic day for Anna that reaches its culmination in the clueless husband's question.

*When dinner is served, the seaman [Anna's husband] comes home, tired, and asks: So, what have you been messing around with all day? (Woman, 31–40 years, master's degree)*

In some cases, the semi-lockdown makes the male partner realize all the work his wife/Anna does as the main care-taker. These stories feature Karl as being ignorant in the beginning but seeing the light by the end, at least partially. In the following story, sarcasm is again used as a rhetorical device.

*Karl finds it difficult to stay home so much. Usually, he is the life and soul of the party and doesn't spend much time at home. He rushes between his job, the gym and his friends at the beer club.... After having been at home for two weeks with his wife and two kids, Karl realises that the laundry doesn't wash itself and the food doesn't automatically show up on his dish. After this bloody COVID ends, he was going to take his family to restaurants more often. And maybe hire some female to help his wife clean. But only maybe. (Woman, 41–50 years, undergraduate degree)*

In this instance, the irony is taken even further in that Karl plans to take more responsibility by hiring some help and going to restaurants, both of which do not require any work from him. His misogynistic view is further asserted in the phrasing 'some female to help his wife' with the cleaning. The story's final words, 'but only maybe', also further stress the storyteller's pessimism about men taking responsibility at the home.

*Karl is the type of a man who only does the fun part of housework. If he made dinner, he will not wash the dishes. If he loaded the washer, he will not hang the laundry to dry. In the beginning of the lockdown, Karl put a status on Facebook where he said that he was really surprised at how much time children nowadays spend at day-care and that feminists had really gone too far demanding that children spend all day in preschool. But after one week of the lockdown, he wanted to throw [the children's school] books out of the window and strangle some stuffed animals. (Woman, 31–40 years, undergraduate degree)*

In some instances, the storytellers make COVID-19 teach Karl a lesson. One story even features the wife leaving Karl because of his refusal to do his share of domestic work. All of the stories about the clueless father are written by university-educated women, which suggests that this group of women feel the need to address men's misogyny around domestic duties, women and feminists. In the previous excerpt, Karl criticizes feminists, an act with which the storyteller is clearly not happy.

Interestingly, this concept of the indifferent father appeared in at least one story by a man.

*It is in times like this when Anna regrets having completed a 90 ECTS master's degree in human relations. She should have followed her old dream of being a nurse. Then Lárus [her husband] could finally have taken some responsibility at home when she would have been an essential front-line worker. (Man, 18–30 years, undergraduate degree)*

As in the stories the women wrote about the clueless father, this quote also represents little faith in men and their willingness to accept responsibility for domestic duties. In this story, Anna is willing to work a risky job during COVID-19 to make her husband do his share of the work. This is quite a drastic measure which underscores the lack of faith in men shouldering their share of domestic responsibilities.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

In this study, we set out to understand what parental qualities are seen as essential for dealing with the crisis of the COVID-19 lockdown. Our findings show that effective parenthood is defined as taking an organized and ambitious approach to parenting, in particular to the children's academic work. This mindset is also to be applied to other daily tasks such as meal preparation and exercise. Furthermore, the draining and stressful life of working parents dealing with the COVID-19 lockdown is to be met with gratitude and positivity. All of these trends, efficiency, organization, positivity, gratitude and parenthood as an individual project, have been linked to the neoliberal governmentality that has seeped into the private sphere of our lives. The pandemic hit societies that had already seen an intensification of these trends and their effect upon paid work, parenthood and gender relations. The COVID-19 lockdown not only revealed the underlying tensions of parenthood, gender relations and paid work but also amplified them.

Our participants are the prime subjects of neoliberal governmentality, as they are overwhelmingly young or middle-aged women with a university education (McRobbie, 2013). Perhaps this is why we also find accounts of resistance in our data. We see stories where happiness is found once the parents, mostly the mothers, fight off the demands of neoliberal parenthood to redefine what is a good and worthy life. We see a different definition of the good and fit parent, a new vision that is born out of the impossibility of neoliberal governmentality on mothers (Cappellini et al., 2019).

With the background of our participants in mind, our data is always going to reflect the perspectives of middle-class women, even when they write stories about fathers. Some of our participants used the opportunity to air their opinions on the traditional male breadwinner who does not have a clue as to what everyday housework and parenting entails. We see that our participants' frame of reference still holds the image of these types of fathers. But, we also see that, through their choice of sarcastically mocking these fathers and making the lockdown teach them a lesson, they want to resist this framework and the current status of gender relations in connection to work–life balance. They are able to imagine an involved father, otherwise no lesson can be taught, and no mockery of the traditional breadwinner can be made, even if this engaged father still might not be dominant in their imaginary stories. It will be interesting to see if the COVID-19 lockdown results in feminists revisiting the topic of shared domestic work that was so prominent with second wave feminists but is less visible in middle-class feminist circles today (McRobbie, 2013). Judging from our data, in the aftermath of COVID-19, middle-class women with a university education might want to reconsider those issues.

There is a possibility that the pandemic will only reinforce neoliberal governmentalities of our private lives and augment social hierarchies in our societies. Scholars have noted that this is what happened after the economic crash in 2008 (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). But the COVID-19 lockdown might also help build up resistance to those very trends. In our stories, we do see an engagement with a new imaginary of the good life. More mothers are pushed to their limits as they manage a home with childcare services halted and schools only partially open, while dealing with the emotional demands of mandatory positivity, discipline and gratitude. The unmanageable nature of those demands might, under COVID-19, become more apparent to the mainstream, which then could further advance the idea of shared housework and affordable day care services. Resistance to the hegemony of positivity and gratitude would also be needed (Illouz, 2007). Although we do not see much of this resistance in our data, there are some examples. A study on the effects of a global scale hardship on the neoliberal governmentality of emotions would be interesting to conduct. Will it further strengthen the demand that we choose a positive attitude in face of adversity, again reinforcing personal solutions for structural matters? Or, will we be better equipped to see structural hindrances and common struggles?

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The total number of adult Icelanders in 2020 was 283,000, so that this group contains a considerable proportion of adult Icelanders.

<sup>2</sup> Postal code 107 or below.

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