



International Responses to Regretting Motherhood

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Abstract

Recent debates about maternal regret, prompted by the publication of Israeli sociologist Orna Donath's (2015) research with mothers who admit to regretting their motherhood, have manifested differently in different cultural contexts. This chapter situates Tiina Sihto and Armi Mustosmäki's analysis of a discussion of regret among contributors to an online forum for mothers in Finland (see Chap. 10) within the international context by comparing the Finnish discussion to similar media debates in Spain and the Anglophone countries. Our analysis reveals that while the idea that a woman might regret her motherhood is more readily accepted in countries where institutional support for mothers is lacking, there is a general acceptance that the inordinate pressures placed on mothers in neoliberal societies to negotiate the competing demands of family and paid employment make it inevitable that some women will experience regret. Moreover, we find evidence that the open conversation about regret trig-

gered by Donath's research is perceived as a further step towards destabilizing traditional attitudes towards gender roles.

11.1 Introduction

The Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—are consistently held up as standard-bearers when it comes to empowering women and promoting gender equality. Generous parental leave, high-quality, state-subsidized childcare, and employment protection for parents remove the burden of childcare from women, facilitating their participation in the workforce (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2018). However, policies aimed at closing the gaps between men and women in the workplace and at home do not automatically transform attitudes towards traditional gender roles. As French feminist philosopher Élisabeth Badinter (2011) argues, “Changing an ideal takes far longer to have effect than providing childcare” (p. 135). Tiina Sihto and Armi Mustosmäki's chapter in this volume (see Chap. 10) underlines how deep-seated expectations of women's roles—including their own expectations of themselves—influence both how they judge their own behaviours and how others judge them. We argue that the debate about maternal regret that has emerged in a number of countries in recent years exposes cultural attitudes about mothers and mothering

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that undercut congratulatory narratives of progress in terms of gender equality.

Sihto and Mustosmäki rightly emphasize the central importance of Israeli sociologist Orna Donath's research to our evolving understanding of how and why a woman might regret her decision to become a mother. Donath's (2015) research on maternal regret has provoked significant discussion, both in academic circles and in the public arena. Her pioneering study, based on interviews with 23 Israeli women who acknowledge that if they could go back, they would not choose again to become mothers, addresses a topic that many people find disconcerting, if not downright abhorrent. Donath's contention that regret is just as legitimate an emotional stance towards maternity as any other, and her insistence that women who experience regret should be able to talk about this without fear of condemnation, was ground-breaking. Donath has made it possible to discuss motherhood in terms of regret; her research has opened the door for further examination of an issue that has tended to be ignored or suppressed in the public imaginary.

The chapter by Sihto and Mustosmäki is one of the first studies to explore the implications of Donath's research for other cultural contexts (e.g. Evertsson and Grunow 2016; Giesselmann et al. 2018; Llewellyn 2016; Moore and Abetz 2019; O'Reilly 2019; Volsche 2020). In comparison to the overtly pronatalist Israel at the heart of Donath's study, in Finland motherhood is presented as an individual choice with numerous measures designed to allow parents to combine work and family life. Here, Sihto and Mustosmäki argue, the reason why regret is taboo is precisely because women are deemed to have such freedom of choice and because the socio-political infrastructure makes mothering so easy, relatively speaking. They contend that the taboo surrounding maternal regret suggests that Finnish attitudes towards motherhood remain more traditional than statistics about the gender gap and wellbeing of mothers might indicate. In fact, ideals of attachment are evident in various contributions to the discussion "Those of you who regret having children: does the feeling ease as the children grow?" on the online forum *vauva.fi*, which Sihto and

Mustosmäki analyzed. This model of parenting also shapes the backlash against confessions of regret, with some commentators emphasizing the damage they may cause affected children. This belief likewise places pressure on women to repress feelings of regret. Other negative responses deny and downplay the existence of regret, conflating it with depression, ambivalence, or exhaustion, as well as displaying concern about the social consequences if regret were to receive cultural legitimation as an acceptable maternal emotion. At the other end of the spectrum, reflecting the rise of therapeutic culture, some commentators validate the importance of opening up about negative emotions. In this respect, online confessions of maternal regret belong to a wider trend of "talking back" in cultural representations of motherhood that deconstruct idealistic stereotypes of "good" motherhood (Podnieks 2012, p. 12).

Our own work has explored the controversy that ensued in Germany after Donath's (2015) research was featured in the daily newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in April 2015 (Göbel 2015).¹ The debate in social media and the press lasted several months and the topic continues to resurface in broader discussions of maternal culture. Our analysis of the so-called #regrettingmotherhood debate in Germany shows how Donath's initial (2015) research—a study among Israeli women published in English and in an American academic journal—was very quickly and effectively moulded to fit particularly German anxieties about motherhood. Many of the contributions to the media debate, whether positive or negative, focused on the pressures on German mothers, particularly working mothers, who must try to balance the competing demands of the home and workplace. The issue of work-life balance and the (lack of) structural supports available to mothers thus emerges much more strongly as a theme in the German context than in the Finnish conversations analyzed by Sihto and Mustosmäki. Moreover, the ideological battles that surfaced in German media and social media

¹The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* is one of Germany's most prominent daily broadsheets, with an average readership of 1.28 million per issue (SZ Media, 2020).

contributions often reference ideas about the maternal role connected to the glorification of motherhood during the National Socialist era, as well as to differences in the cultural construction of motherhood between East and West during the period of division. While East German mothers were expected to contribute to the state through paid employment, which was facilitated through widespread provision of public childcare, West German tax and welfare regimes were based on a male breadwinner model, which made it difficult, if not outright prohibitive, for mothers to work. However, the East German model did not automatically lead to gender equality. On the contrary, some supports for working mothers, such as generous maternity leave and paid time off for housework, only served to reinforce the assumption that childcare and the home were a woman's responsibility (Ferree 1993). In any case, since the unification of Germany in 1990, the West German model of motherhood has become the norm in both parts of the new Germany. The passionate reactions on both sides of the #regrettingmotherhood debate illustrate the incompatibility of Donath's notion of regret with the way in which the maternal role tends to be idealized in contemporary Germany (Heffernan and Stone 2021).

The distinct cases of Israel, Finland and Germany indicate that maternal regret is a complex, individualized phenomenon that is shaped by local policy and cultural narratives about mothering. In this chapter, we broaden out this discussion to explore how such factors also influence public discourse about maternal regret in other contexts. We, therefore, examine how Donath's research and ensuing discussions about maternal regret were reported in the print media. Our rationale for a thematic analysis of newspaper articles is threefold. First, there is a multidirectional quality to discussions of maternal regret, with social media users often responding to or retweeting newspaper articles, on the one hand, and traditional media reacting to trending topics on social media, on the other. Second, discussions of maternal regret in print and online newspapers expose a more diverse readership to the topic than online forums, whether private or

open, which tend to be organized according to topics, for instance, via hashtags or subforums. It is no surprise that the proliferation of online forums has helped to desacralize cultural narratives about motherhood: they provide a relatively sheltered, if not anonymous, outlet for confession. Yet the very reporting of a topic in the traditional media also implies a recognition on the part of agenda setters and gatekeepers that certain issues are relevant to wider society. Third, the articles we analyze reproduce confessions of maternal regret, report on the response, and provide commentary on the wider contexts for mothering in ways that illuminate emergent "structures of feeling" relating to the gender gap and how parenting is constructed and experienced in different cultural contexts (Williams 1977, p. 127).

In choosing these contexts, we were guided by the Nexis database of newspaper articles relating to the search term '*Orna Donath*', given the centrality of Donath's work to public discussions of maternal regret. We then used Internet search engines to cast our nets more widely and capture articles about maternal regret where Donath is not an explicit point of reference. The German-, Spanish-, and English-language media had the most hits in the Nexis database (203, 64, and 38 respectively).² Since we have analyzed the German response elsewhere (Heffernan and Stone 2021), the current discussion focuses on how maternal regret has been discussed in Spanish-speaking and English-speaking countries.

The English-language corpus presents us with the so-called "Anglosphere problem" (Riley 2005, para. 8), i.e. the difficulty of dividing English-language online content along rigid national lines. Despite some regional restrictions on access to content, there are fewer borders in the consumption of online material. Some pieces included here appear with outlets that are published in several Anglosphere countries and refer to other English-speaking contexts. This cross-

²Our analysis is limited by the linguistic restrictions of the Nexis database, which prevents closer engagement with other contexts where Donath's study has been published in translation, notably Poland and Korea.

referencing reflects the fact that, beyond historical links, “the Anglosphere broadly shares ideological and economic structures, and that the media systems within those countries share enough commonalities to be compared meaningfully” (Duffy and Knight 2019, p. 938). As Michaels and Kokanović (2018) explain, “the dominant cultures in Great Britain, Canada, the USA, and Australia share common parenting ideologies that take shape within similar economic structures” (p. 8). Drawn in broad strokes, Anglosphere countries are in fact “noninterventionist liberal”. with relatively low social spending. Private insurance schemes play an important role in welfare provision and state spending prioritizes those in most need. Though Spanish-language news stories are also often shared between media outlets in Spain and Latin America, all articles in our corpus except three items (two from Mexico and one from Chile) were published in Spain. We find little evidence that Donath’s research has generated significant interest to date in Latin America. For this reason, we focus our analysis of public debate about maternal regret on the Spanish context.

The newspaper articles we analyze provide a snapshot of wider conversations about maternal regret and function as a barometer of shifting attitudes towards motherhood. Variations in the mediation and reception of Donath’s research reveal cultural differences in the social and ideological construction of motherhood. Finally, we examine the role that questions to do with gender inequality play in international conversations about maternal regret. It is noteworthy that our case studies manifest different approaches to family policy, falling into different clusters in Esping-Andersen’s (1990, 1999) model of capitalist welfare regimes, which groups countries depending on how universal, or alternatively status-dependent, social welfare is and the role that state or market plays in de-familialising caring responsibilities (see Chap. 3 for an in-depth exploration of this construct). This chapter thus outlines our hypothesis that maternal regret is not contingent on social circumstances or perceived gender inequity, as some commentators speculate. Instead, the existence of regret

across diverse contexts debunks the essentialist myth—still prevalent even in these progressive western contexts—that all women will ultimately find satisfaction in motherhood.

11.2 #Madresarrepentidas in Spain

The major role that the family plays in providing social welfare distinguishes Spain and other southern European nations even from welfare conservative countries such as Germany. Consequently, Pérez-Caramés (2014) argues,

Mediterranean welfare regimes involve the most gender inequality, as they consider women primarily as in the role they have in their families—reproducing and caring, leaving them unprotected towards the market in the case of economic need, as they do not promote reconciliation between family roles and work roles (p. 177).

As Baizan (2016) further notes, as women’s participation in the labour market has increased,

the caring capacity of families has been seriously weakened, undermining the foundations of familism. At the same time, men’s roles have changed only marginally, and adaptation of the welfare state to these new gender roles has been slow and partial (p. 197).

Indeed, Spain invests none of its GDP in childcare and offers only 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, below both the OECD (18.1 weeks) and EU average (22.1 weeks) (OECD, 2020a PF3.1; OECD, 2020a PF2.1).

In Spain, moreover, fascism’s focus on pronatalism meant that, after the end of the dictatorship, many women began to turn away from motherhood. Against this backdrop, Spain’s birth rate has fallen sharply since the 1970s; its Total Fertility Rate (TFR) is amongst the lowest in the European Union (Eurostat 2020). Of course, Spain is not unique in experiencing a significant drop in fertility since the 1970s, as Eurostat figures document. However, in tracing the emergence of what they called “lowest-low” fertility in the 1990s, i.e. a TFR at or below 1.3 births per woman, Kohler et al. (2002, p. 641) pay special attention to Southern-European countries like Italy and Spain, where birth rates dropped

particularly rapidly. Analyzing the trend towards childlessness in contemporary Europe, Kreyenfeld and Konietzka (2017) note that though this phenomenon affects both men and women, conservative commentators often lay the blame at women's feet, impugning them as selfish and individualistic for focussing on their careers instead of their families.

There is evidence to suggest that anxiety about increasing numbers of childless women in Spain and the greying of the population has also permeated the public arena. For Barbara Zecchi (2005), public concern about the socioeconomic impact of the low birth rate led to a resurgence of pronatalist discourse and imagery in the media in the early 2000s. Commenting on this glorification of pregnancy and motherhood, Zecchi remarks that, "The new efforts to foster the birth rate have paradoxically granted motherhood almost the same place of honour it had during Franco's regime" (p. 148). Her description of the media landscape in Spain accentuates women's implication in what is perceived as a deeply problematic trend towards childlessness; it indicates a pointed effort to encourage a return to the "natural" roles of wife and mother.

Given that the Spanish context reveals similar social and political anxieties about motherhood to those in contemporary Germany, it is perhaps not surprising that Donath's research also resonated with the Spanish public—albeit to a somewhat lesser extent than in Germany. In September 2016, when Donath's book was published, a new subtitle offered a hint of its provocative content: '*Una mirada radical a la maternidad y sus falacias sociales*' [A radical look at motherhood and its social fallacies].

Even before Donath's book appeared on bookshelves, the press began to report on its incendiary content. Reviewing the book for the liberal online newspaper *El Confidencial*, Daniel Arjona (2016) referred to the furore the study had provoked in Germany and confidently declared, "The last taboo has just fallen" (para. 4). Remarkably, this review was titled with an incomplete quotation from a participant in Donath's (2017) study: "To lose my children would bring a certain relief" (Arjona 2016). The

participant in question, Sophia, the mother of two children aged between 1 and 4, had in fact continued, "but there would be more pain than relief" (Donath 2017, p. 122). Even more remarkably, the Twitter link for the article automatically pulled this partial quotation as the headline and added the hashtag #madresarrepentidas. Although these paratextual circumstances suggest an effort on the part of the editorial team to capitalize on the inflammatory content of Donath's research, the retweets offer little evidence that readers were scandalized. On the contrary, most express interest in a topic that they perceive as illuminating and important.

In general, the Spanish response to Donath's book was quite positive, recognizing the provocative potential of her research while drawing attention to its importance. In the weeks following its publication, the main Spanish daily newspaper *El País* published two interviews with Donath, allowing her to explain her findings in her own words. Speaking to Lucía Lijtmaer (2016), Donath emphasizes that not all women's experiences of motherhood are positive; while for some it provides a route to social integration, for others, it has been a heavy burden that has led to regret. Donath thus argues that it is important to listen to women from all walks of life and to speak of "motherhoods, not motherhood" (para. 15). The second interview, which appeared under the title '*Maternal instinct does not exist*' (Carbajosa, 2016) offers a succinct and very perceptive summary of Donath's research: "Although it is assumed that we decide freely to be mothers, the social pressure to have children is enormous and . . . the result is that some end up regretting it" (para. 1). Carbajosa discusses the international reception, remarking "Donath seems to have awoken a beast" (para. 2). In the interview, Donath offers an explanation for some of the backlash: "There is a perception that this debate is dangerous for the state and for the social order" (para. 6). Both interviewers stress the importance of Donath's work, which Ana Palicio (2016), writing for the online parenting magazine *Ser Padres*, goes so far as to dub "a new feminist manifesto" (para. 5).

The fact that Donath was invited to participate in a roundtable entitled '*The Family Is*

Dead. Long Live the Family' at the Kosmopolis literary festival evinces the extent to which her work was read in the light of Spanish anxieties about the erosion of traditional family models. She appeared alongside Catalan writer and feminist activist María Llopis, whose 2015 book *Maternidades Subversivas* [Subversive motherhoods] spotlights new forms of motherhood beyond traditional and heteronormative models; writer and anti-racist activist Brigitte Vasallo, whose novel *PornoBurka* (2013) foregrounds gender, sexuality, and Islamophobia; and Catalan writer and translator Bel Olid, whose 2017 book *Feminisme de Butzaca. Kit de supervivència* [Pocket Feminism. Survival kit] argues that feminism is more relevant than ever today, given the persistence of subtle forms of discrimination. The panel was reported in several Catalan newspapers and widely shared on social media.

Moreover, several Spanish press articles relate Donath's questioning of assumptions about motherhood to new feminist and subversive voices that challenge prevalent myths about mothers. Some commentators draw comparisons to the 'Club de Malas Madres' (Bad Mothers' Club), founded by mommy blogger Laura Baena to support mothers, particularly working mothers, and encourage them to reject the myth of maternal perfection (Carasco 2017; Roca 2018; Pereda 2018). Growing out of a Twitter account @malasmadres associated with Baena's blog, this club now has over 750,000 followers (Club de Malas Madres 2020), and Baena has become one of Spain's foremost influencers, also on a political level. Under the banner #YoNoRenuncio [I'm not quitting], she has lobbied for equality and more flexibility in the workplace. Baena's political impact demonstrates how feminists can harness the popularity of digital platforms to draw attention to the personal but no less important struggles mothers face (Ross and Fellers 2017).

Overall, the Spanish newspaper articles examined here show that Donath's research has been perceived as a contribution to a wider feminist revision of women's roles in society—one seen as urgently necessary. Backlash against her participants' confessions was minimal,

especially compared to the furore in the German press and on social media. Instead, we find ample evidence that maternal regret is perceived as conceivable, even understandable, especially given the low level of state support for mothers, persistent gender inequality in the home, and the framing of childbearing as an individual choice (Alvarez 2018). Within a context that tends to relate the problems mothers face in negotiating the demands of family and the workplace to personal decisions, it is not difficult to understand Spanish readers' willingness to accept that a woman might come to regret her decision to become a mother—and why a piece of research that illuminates this is viewed as an important contribution to contemporary discussions about gender equality.

11.3 Regretting Motherhood in Anglosphere Media

In the English-speaking world, Donath's research and the #regrettingmotherhood debate were not viewed as catalysts for a new conversation about mothering but often understood as part of a "larger groundswell of maternal reckoning" reaching back to the mid-1970s, when advice columnist Ann Landers conducted a survey on parental regret with her North American readers (Kingston 2018, para. 13). Of 10,000 respondents, 70 per cent indicated regret (Landers 1976).³ Forty years later, Corinne Maier's (2007) confession of occasional regret in *No Kid: 40 raisons de ne pas avoir d'enfant* [No Kid: 40 reasons not to have children], a bestseller in France and Canada, caused a furore in France that caught the attention of English-language newspapers. In 2011, British tabloid *The Daily Mail* published a confession by 50-year-old Jill Scott (pseudonym) (Scott 2011), who admitted that she regretted becoming a mother. Two years later, Isabella Dutton (2013) confessed her maternal regret in the same newspaper,

³Donath (2009) has stated that this study reinforced her decision to research the topic of maternal regret.

prompting 1838 comments. As *Vice*'s Jennifer Swann (2016) points out,

the article also resonated with parents who identified with Dutton's regret—and admired her honesty. A Google search of her name today reveals pages of blog posts, essays, and online forums from parents celebrating, defending, and pledging gratitude to Dutton for saying the previously unspeakable (para. 12).

Thus, Donath's study provided scholarly framing and legitimacy for voices that had started to emerge in previous decades. As Kingston (2018) writes in high-profile Canadian news magazine *Macleans*, "Dutton and Maier are no longer freakish outliers; parental regret, or 'the last parenting taboo' as it's dubbed in the media has been covered by everyone" (para. 4), including high-profile platforms spanning parenting and women's magazines and mainstream news outlets like the *BBC* and *The Guardian* (Compton 2018; Otte 2016).

This existing discursive platform might explain why there was relatively little backlash against Donath's research in the English-language press, though there were some exceptions. In *The Toronto Star*, King (2016) suggests that only those regretful mothers who suffer psychological problems or experienced difficult childhood deserve any empathy. Ultimately, she sees the conversation about maternal regret as a sign that "the human potential for selfishness is vast, ugly and limitless" (para. 9), especially because she deems selflessness a defining characteristic of maternity. Writing for the New Zealand site *MercatorNet*, as well as the U.S. *Intellectual Takeout*, Moynihan (2016) disputes claims that "women are still burdened by cultural expectations that their fulfilment lies in motherhood" (para. 8), referring to the growing number who opt not to have children, a trend she describes as anti-natalist. In the *Washington Examiner*, Last (2016) likewise dismisses Donath's study. He sees her qualitative interviews not as data but as "life-style justification anecdota" (para. 10) that do nothing to revise the general trend that "people who have children still seem happy with their decision" (para. 11). This claim has, of course, been refuted by numerous studies (Glass et al. 2016).

Elsewhere, journalistic commentators do not downplay the significance of Donath's findings, nor do they attenuate the radical stance of regret by conflating it with ambivalence, as was common in the German and Finnish discussions. Overall, discussion is measured, even when considering the potential impact of confessions of maternal regret on children. In the forum discussion analyzed by Sihto and Mustosmäki in Chap. 10, women repeatedly cited this concern as a reason for not publicly speaking about their feelings of regret, suggesting the potency of cultural narratives about deterministic mothering. Rather than catastrophise, Anglosphere commentators frequently highlight the benefits of open conversation, even between parents and children. *The Guardian*'s Marsh (2017) speaks to Morgane, the daughter of Victoria Elder (2016), whose highly viewed reply to the *Quora* question 'What is it like to regret having children?' was syndicated on the American parenting site *Fatherly*. Morgane criticizes the reaction to her mother: "There were a bunch of people calling her a liar and a horrible mum, which really made me upset, because I know what she's really like" (para. 18).

Journalists demonstrate the wider relevance of Donath's research by interviewing others who regret becoming mothers (Kingston 2018; Swann 2016; Treleaven 2016; Yasa 2017), as well as quoting from online forums in which parents admit their regret (Reddit 2017; Mumsnet 2009). The Facebook community '*I regret having children*' has garnered more than 17,000 followers since it was started in July 2012 (see Blott 2016; Wilson 2017). The reasons for regret echo those identified by Sihto and Mustosmäki in the Finnish context: self-abnegation; deterioration of relationships; exhaustion; frustration and boredom with the monotony of parenting; feelings of being overwhelmed by the cognitive burden of mothering; and missed opportunities, especially professional.

Of these detailed engagements with maternal regret, Yasa's (2017) article, published in numerous Australian newspapers, generated the most discussion. Gray (2017) wrote a follow-up, syndicated piece describing the "mixed" reaction to Yasa's piece, evident also in published reader

letters. Gray asks why “reaction to women who regret becoming mothers immediately shifts into concern for their children” (p. 18), which she interprets as “a telling sign we won’t focus on the structural forces that make women resent the job” (p. 18). In line with this conviction, journalists also emphasize the links between maternal regret and women’s decisions not to have children (see Kingston 2018; Treleven 2016).

Many English-language commentaries are indeed meta-discursive in character (see Marsh 2017). Some consider why the issue particularly resonated in Germany (Moran 2016; Strauss 2016). *The Guardian’s* Otte (2016) links the backlash to #regrettingmotherhood there to social narratives constructing motherhood as culturally vital. *Marie Claire’s* Treleven (2016) describes the issues in Germany as symptomatic of broader phenomena: “For many countries, raising a family still constitutes a vast landscape of unpaid work that falls almost wholly on women’s shoulders” (para. 22). Many commentators interrogate the ‘mommy myths’ that underpin pronatalist societies (see Kingston 2018; Treleven 2016), one that idealizes motherhood as the key to female happiness and propagates intensive parenting, a highly privileged practice that places unrealistic pressures on mothers (Marsh 2017; Moran 2016; Swann 2016; Treleven 2016). These articles contain a critical stance on ideologies of intensive and attachment parenting that permeate the confessions analyzed by Sihto and Mustosmäki and that contribute to mothers’ feelings of guilt and desire to hide their stance of regret.

The gender gap is a recurring frame for English-language discussions. According to Sullivan (2013), “a modified breadwinner model, in which most women are employed but are still expected to fulfil the major domestic caring role, is dominant” (p. 78) across countries in the Anglosphere; “parents generally have to rely on market-based child-care solutions to work-family conflicts, either through employers or through child-care services” (p. 78). Compared to the other nations discussed in this chapter, the cost of childcare as a proportion of the average wage is relatively high in Anglosphere countries (OECD

2020a, PF3.4A). The United States is the most explicitly antistatist, with no universal healthcare or national approach to paid parental leave, and generally “does very little to provide for the needs of women and children” (Bolzendahl and Olafsdottir 2008, p. 286). Guo and Gilbert (2007) observe that the gap between social democratic and other countries has lessened since 1990; the latter now invest an increasing proportion of GDP in family benefits. Nonetheless, gender equality remains “strikingly absent as an explicit design feature and goal of the Anglophone parental leave policies” (Baird and O’Brien 2015, p. 200).⁴

Writing about maternal regret for *Vice*, Swann (2016) refers to a study on the 7 per cent per child “wage penalty for motherhood” (Budig and England 2001, p. 220) in the United States. Other studies ascertain no similar fatherhood penalty (Loh 1996); Lundberg and Rose (2000) even note a small wage increase after the birth of a man’s first child. Treleven (2016) cites Bianchi et al. (2012) who show that in the twenty-first century U.S. women have spent nearly 14 hours per week on childcare, significantly higher than the amount recorded by time-diary data for previous decades, which registered a low of 7.3 hours in 1975. For fathers, the figure was approximately 7.2 hours per week in 2009–2010, compared to 2.6 in 1965. Synthesizing a range of research in this area, Bianchi and Milkie (2010) note that

Almost all studies of housework provided evidence on a limited number of causal explanations for men’s relatively low contribution—the time availability explanation, the relative resources account, or some variant of the gender perspective that emphasized either the role of gender ideology or the idea of housework as “doing gender.” Despite the large number of studies, there emerged no dominant consensus on the most persuasive

⁴According to OECD data (2021, PF2.1), since 2000, Finland has increased its leave offering for fathers from 3 to 9 weeks; 6 of those weeks allow for parental and homecare that goes beyond paternity leave. Germany has also introduced leave for fathers, which is currently 8.7 weeks. While Spain has offered limited leave for fathers since 1970 s, today only 4.3 weeks are paid. Australia and the UK both allow 2 weeks of paternity leave, whereas Canada, New Zealand, and the US provide no paid leave of any kind.

explanation for the persistence of the gender division of labour in the home (p. 708).

Kane (2018) additionally adds that “Parenting labour is gender-differentiated not only in minutes and hours, but in type and accompanying stress levels” (p. 397). *Macleans’* journalist Kingston (2018) references a similar study to connect gender asymmetries, maternal regret, and the increasing dominance of the ideology of attachment parenting that is evident in the discussions of maternal regret evaluated by Sihto and Mustosmäki in Chap. 10.

11.4 Conclusion

This chapter situates the Finnish experiences analyzed by Sihto and Mustosmäki in the previous chapter in an international framework. Across the contexts we have analyzed, several threads emerge. First, there are perceived links between maternal regret and class-based ideologies of attachment and intensive parenting, which dictate that the best mothers personally manage all aspects of their children’s upbringing, which inevitably leads to maternal stress and exhaustion, especially if infrastructural and institutional supports are deficient. Second, sympathetic strands of the discussion contend that speaking up about maternal regret is not only important for women’s wellbeing, and perhaps even for the relationship with their children, but that it is also a necessary part of the project to expand cultural discourses about mothering and its role in women’s lives. Third, backlash discourses frequently pathologized feelings of regret as symptomatic of depression or trivialized perceived feelings of regret. According to this line of argument, regret is a useless emotion at odds with the neoliberal imperatives of western culture. The most moralistic contributions to the international discussion depict regretful mothers as the ultimate bad mothers, mistaking the object of regret by confusing a stance of regret towards motherhood with a lack of love for the children.

In spite of these similarities, especially in the reasons that mothers give for their stance of

regret, differences have emerged in the public discourses around the topic in Israel, Finland, Spain, Germany, and the Anglosphere, particularly regarding the audibility and tone of discussions. In the Spanish media, the issue dovetailed with broader calls to desacralize the country’s maternal ideology. Donath’s research was framed as a feminist antidote to pronatalist imperatives that have long constructed motherhood as an inevitable step in a woman’s biography. In the Anglosphere, discussion centred on the reasons why Donath’s research generated such controversy in Germany but also viewed the backlash as characteristic of phenomena in ‘more developed’ countries, where mothers are increasingly called on to combine careers with caring duties. In this respect, commentators interpret maternal regret as a radical expression of a persistent and universal sense that gender equity has not yet been achieved, especially as it relates to unpaid care and domestic work and cultural narratives about parenting. It is noteworthy that the discussion in the media has lacked a consistently intersectional dimension, one that will be fundamental for providing a deeper understanding of parental regret in the future.

It is likewise remarkable that the articles focus almost entirely on mothers. In her commentary for *Ozy.com*, Moran (2016) draws on a recent German survey that found that, out of 1,228 parents in total, 19 per cent of mothers and 20 per cent of fathers would choose not to become parents if they could go back in time (YouGov 2016). While the survey finds that regret is equally likely for mothers and fathers, the reasons diverge. Twice as many mothers as fathers perceive parenthood as having had a negative impact on their careers. Less clear are the reasons why more fathers than mothers regret their parenthood. Consequently, Christoph Geissler, head of the YouGov research institute, is planning a follow-up with the male respondents. In an interview with the Israeli *ATMag*, Donath clarifies that she had originally spoken with ten men who regretted becoming fathers. However, she continues, “in the end, I decided there was no place for them. Men who do not want to be

fathers are not completely exempt from society's judgment. But they also don't have the same level of expectations as women, as part of their identity" (Bashan, 2017, para. 25; see also Gray 2017). Elsewhere, Donath notes that women in her study were often "threatened by divorce" if they did not change their minds about not wanting to become parents, whereas this threat did not seem to hover over reluctant fathers (Kingston 2018, para. 20). Likewise speaking to Kingston (2018), maternal scholar Andrea O'Reilly suggests two reasons for the relative silence of men in the conversation about paternal regret. On the one hand, it is still culturally and legally easier for men to "walk away" (para. 20). On the other,

Men's identity is never collapsed into their parental one; if you're a bad mother, you're a bad woman. If a father is late at day-care, it's 'Poor thing, he's busy.' A mother who's late is viewed as selfish and irresponsible (Kingston, 2018, para. 20; see also Richler, 2017).

Drawing meaningful conclusions about the relationship between maternal regret and gender inequality would require a greater number of case studies and more detailed empirical research. A springboard for such inquiries might be offered by recent discussions of the gender gap in relation to shifting fertility rates and attitudes to family life. After all, some of the conversations we analyze posit links between maternal regret and wider fertility trends, including voluntary childlessness. Yet developments in the TFR do not map neatly on to standard benchmarks for assessing gender equality. By way of illustration, Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) summarize a body of scholarship linking gender equality, and especially gender equity, that is "perceptions of fairness and opportunities" (p. 6), with higher fertility levels.

There is no clear correlation between fertility trends and macro-level analyses such as those contained in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2019), which considers economic participation, educational attainment, and political involvement (Mills 2010). While Finland, Germany, Spain, and New Zealand score in the top ten countries, the UK and

Canada rank at 19 and 21 respectively, with Australia 44th and the US 53rd, reflecting the fact that both place in the bottom 50 in terms of political empowerment. It seems especially paradoxical that Finland, third overall in the Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum (2019), has a TFR that has dropped below the European average of 1.59 births per woman and the OECD average of 1.7 births per woman. Women in these 'more developed' countries are having fewer children for a wide range of reasons, some of which may relate to gender equality in the domestic sphere and perceived inequity in terms of support offered to parents in combining work and family, increasingly relevant as more and more women join the work force. We should also not underestimate the impact of more nebulous forms of inequity relating to cultural expectations of mothers. In previous research, we note that such issues also feed into discussions of maternal regret in Germany (Heffernan and Stone 2021). Donath would, however, propose caution in the face of temptations to posit a simplistic correlation between maternal regret and gender inequality. Instead of seeing regret as inherently tied to the social infrastructure that eases or constrains parenting, Donath (2017) believes that the existence of maternal regret also exposes the "a binary that leaves no room for women to consider themselves and be considered by others to be human beings with the ability to determine what is meaningful in their lives on their own" (p. 206).

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