



Reluctantly Solo? Representations of Single Mothers via Donor Procedure, Insemination and IVF in Swedish Newspapers

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INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, new or modified forms of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) have opened up new possibilities for singles to become parents. While ARTs as such have been much debated, this is also true for the legal and political reforms that regulate their use and accessibility. One example is the legal reform in 2016 that extended access to ARTs via the Swedish public health care system—specifically insemination and in vitro fertilization (IVF) with donor sperm—to single women. This

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chapter explores representations in Swedish newspapers of solo mothers, that is, single mothers who achieve motherhood via ARTs. It focuses on how these women figure in the daily news press in the period 2014–2018, the years around the inauguration of the new law.

Research on solo mothers via ARTs has grown concurrently with the phenomenon as such.¹ Many studies are based on interviews with middle- to upper class mothers in the UK (Graham 2018), the US (Bock 2000; Hertz 2006; Layne 2015; Mannis 1999) or Canada (Kelly 2012); they focus on the women's ambivalence about 'going solo' upon realizing that they would not achieve pregnancy as part of a conventional heterosexual couple, as well as on issues of legitimacy and responsibility linked to single motherhood. Hertz (2006) also explores the kinds of family-making that these women engage in with new partners and/or co-carers. Other studies specifically explore representations of these mothers. A study of newspaper representations of solo mothers via ARTs in the UK finds that they stand out as deviants from the maternal norm, and predominantly come across as negatively charged and heavily 'othered' (Zadeh and Foster 2016).² To date, in the Swedish context, whereas there exists a body of sociological work on single mothers (Alsarve et al. 2017; Björnberg 1997), there is little humanities research on representations of single parents—mothers or fathers. However, a recent study demonstrates that in Swedish newspapers single mothers figure in diverse ways, and that solo motherhood specifically is represented not as a first-hand choice but rather a plan B (Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020).

SOLO MOTHERS IN SWEDEN

An estimated 1–2% of all mothers in Sweden become solo mothers via the ART of donor procedure and insemination/in vitro fertilization (IVF).³ In Sweden, the first IVF-conceived child was born (to a married couple) in 1982. Three years later, in 1985, sperm donation became legal for married heterosexual couples. It took close to 20 years for further ART reform to be passed. In 2003, egg donation became legal for heterosexual couples. In 2005, sperm donation and egg donation/IVF for lesbian women in couples (cohabiting or married) was legalized, and in 2019, embryo donation was legalized. Swedish legislation regulates donor anonymity: the donor is anonymous to the parents, but not to the child (at age 18, children can find their donor, if they wish).⁴

Mothers via ARTs are a small but probably growing minority among single parents. In the beginning of the period in focus of the present study

(2014–2018), insemination and IVF treatment were available through the public health care system to heterosexual and lesbian couples but not to single women. A 2014 governmental report (SOU 2014: 29) suggested that the law be changed to allow single women equal access to insemination and IVF. The report speculated that approximately 1500–2000 single women annually would seek such treatment; the prognosis for the number of treatments per year was that it would go up by 3700–5000 (with each woman needing on average two to three attempts to achieve pregnancy), and hence there would be a need for an additional 250–350 sperm donors to meet the greater demand for donor sperm.⁵ In 2016, the new law was inaugurated, and single women gained legal access to ARTs. Before this legal change, but also after—due partly to a shortage of sperm donors in Sweden and an inability of the health care system to accommodate the demand from single women for treatment—women have travelled from Sweden to other countries, predominantly Denmark, to achieve pregnancy ‘on their own’. ‘Going to Denmark’ has in fact become shorthand for ‘going solo’ as a mother in Sweden (Andreassen 2018).⁶

Solo mothers are symbolically and gender-politically interesting for several reasons. First, they stand as an example of ‘families we choose’ that seemingly subverts the hegemony of the nuclear family ideal, the ideal of coupledness and the ‘natural’ link between sexuality and procreation. Second, in the particular context of Sweden, women parenting on their own go against both the Swedish political ideal of dual-earner, dual-carer couples, and against the societal ideal of involved fathers (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Wells and Bergnehr 2014; Wahlström Henriksson 2016). These women, who in previous research have been termed single mothers ‘by choice’ (Hertz 2006; Layne 2015; Volgsten and Schmidt 2019), activate pertinent questions concerning (socially stratified access to) reproductive practices, but also concerning family formation and familial lives.

This chapter investigates how solo mothers in Sweden were represented and debated in the major daily newspapers during the years around the passing of the new law. Focusing on representations of solo mothers, we are interested in the constitutive power of symbols and language, and hence in the double meanings of ‘representation’ as such, for an ‘image’ of something also signals what/who is, or can be, that ‘something’—in this case, a solo mother—and is always linked to power (Hall 1997; Spivak 2010). Representations of solo mothers in news media build upon and

contribute to culture-specific understandings of single motherhood, and therefore, studying such representations is one inroad to understanding how meanings of motherhood circulate in a given society. How, then, is the solo mother, and mothering ‘on one’s own’ described, discussed, and charged with meanings and values in the sample?

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The data was collected from the four major daily newspapers in Sweden in their paper editions during the years 2014–2018 (search date October 10, 2019). Two are morning papers: *Dagens Nyheter* (DN; liberal) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD; conservative), and two are evening papers/tabloids: *Aftonbladet* (social-democratic) and *Expressen* (liberal).⁷ Newspapers are still a dominant form of news dissemination in Sweden, even in times of steadily increasing online news media. The selected dailies have wide national circulations in paper copy and online versions; they are central in setting the national news agenda, and hence contribute to a ‘national imaginary’ (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1996). As such, they may affect as well as reflect lived lives, subjectivities, political decision-making, knowledge production and power relations (Hall 1997). Although traditional news media consumption has decreased since the mid-1990s, newspaper readership continues to be quite substantive. Close to 50% of the Swedish population read an evening paper several times a week, and almost 50% subscribe to a morning paper (Martinsson and Andersson 2019). Consequently, it is relevant to study newspapers as a major news genre that mediates representations of solo mothers.

Searches via the digital archive Mediearkivet were based on variations on ‘lone mother’ (Sw. *ensamstående mamma/mor/moder*, *ensam mamma/mor/moder*, *singelmamma*, *solomamma*) in singular and plural forms, as well as ‘assisted reproduction’, ‘insemination’, ‘donor’ and variants thereof. Only hits referring to Sweden were saved. In the major newspapers, solo mothers figure in a small number of articles during the five years (62 in total).⁸ The data is rich and varied: it includes political statements (editorial pages, debate articles, political commentary, essays), news items and book reviews. There is a logical peak in numbers in 2016, when there are also more lengthy articles with substantial, in-depth reportage, often based on interviews with, and sometimes written by, solo mothers. In 2014 and 2015, many articles focus on the government report and the (suggested) new law, and offer stories about women

who have ‘gone to Denmark’; in 2017 and 2018, numbers of texts drop considerably, and content focuses on difficulties around conception and access to treatment.

We categorized the text sample according to text genre and text length (from minor news notice to multi-page reportage) and whether the solo mother speaks in her own voice, or is spoken about by others. Through repeated reading of the sample, during and after coding, we identified two major themes. In the following, we present a brief overview of the solo mothers in the sample, and then discuss the major themes: first, the link between temporalities and choice in these women’s lives, and second, the place of men in single women’s reproduction, and in the life of the (future) child. We investigate these themes through the critical lenses of respectability and intensive mothering. Drawing upon the crucial work of Beverly Skeggs on respectability (1997), we explore how middle-class-ness and heterosexual femininity and whiteness are central to these representations of solo mothers as respectable. The representations also signal that the maternal respectability of solo mothers builds upon demonstrating particular forms of intensive mothering (Hays 1996).

In this text, we use ‘solo mother’ to reference single women who achieve motherhood via ARTs. However, the women in the sample do not use the term ‘solo’. Although the term solo mother exists in English, and occurs in the research literature and other texts, it is non-existent in this sample. By far the most common term to refer to mothers in one-parent households in the sample is *ensamstående mamma* (appr. lone mom; actually ‘mother who stands alone’). *Ensamstående mamma* does not, however, have the same negative connotations as ‘lone mother’ has in, for example, the UK and the US (Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020). *Singelmamma* (single mom), which also figures in the sample, although much less frequently, has connotations of dating and romantic availability. While translation is always difficult between languages and cultures, we use ‘single mother’ here as the overarching term for mothers in one-parent households, while using ‘solo mother’ to reference the single mothers via ARTs at the center of this chapter. This choice is partly motivated by the ways that these mothers distance themselves from the connotations of *ensamstående* (Sw. *ensam* means alone; lonely) in relation to their own situation, which, they often stress, is marked by well-functioning and broad social and familial networks.

WHO ARE THE SOLO MOTHERS? HOW DO THEY FIGURE IN THE SAMPLE?

The demographic profile of solo mothers is as relatively affluent women in their thirties and forties. All mothers who appear in the sample are urban, white and middle-class, they are often presented as having professional careers and substantial supportive social networks. In other words, they are economically and socially privileged women, carriers of ‘respectability’ as defined by Beverly Skeggs in her classic study of femininity and class (1997).⁹ Since many of them have achieved pregnancy before 2016, they have typically ‘gone to Denmark’ and paid large sums of money for treatment. Although the category of women who are represented in the sample are middle class and affluent, in the texts their financial status largely goes unmentioned. Financial issues appear explicitly only in texts that specify the expenses linked to treatment in clinics abroad (30,000 SEK per attempt; 50,000 SEK in total), costs which the new law will eliminate. In one case the new law is described as ‘democratic’ since it extends the right to become a mother via a sperm donor to all single women, not just those who can afford treatment abroad (‘Barnlängtgande väljer Danmark’ *SvD*, 16 January 2016). This category of lone mothers—well-off, well-educated professionals—offers a ‘counter-image’ to common understandings of lone mothers as materially and otherwise deprived, vulnerable and struggling (Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020). At the same time, as middle-class, white, urban and predominantly heterosexual women they correspond to the kind of subject that is generally most visible in Swedish news media (Jakobsson and Stiernstedt 2018).¹⁰

Solo mothers, when compared to single mothers by divorce/separation (cf. Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020) are given relatively large amounts of space. The mothers’ own voices and perspectives on motherhood feature in long interviews and in-depth pieces. Some of them write articles about life as a solo mother, thereby demonstrating reflexivity as well as media literacy. One of the most vocal, and most mediatized, solo mothers is a journalist, Josefin Olevik, who has published an autobiographical book about her experience, and who becomes a strong representative for the phenomenon, especially in 2016. Hence, a minority phenomenon gains quite high visibility in terms of focus, text length and inclusion of the mother’s voice. The solo mothers’ narratives have in

common that they focus on timing and possibility, as well as on the situation of lone parenting vs. co-parenting. Many also raise issues around the situation of the child of a solo mother, and a few texts include a child's voice on the situation. The following sections will focus on these central themes in the data: first, temporalities and (im)possibilities of choosing to become a mother (on one's own), and, second, the place of a man as a co-parent/father to the (future) child vs. parenting on one's own.

NO CHOICE BUT TO 'GO SOLO': ON TEMPORALITY AND (IM)POSSIBILITY

Several of the articles in the news material describe the solo mother as having had no other options than using ARTs if she was to become a parent at all. A narrative that occurs repeatedly in the data speaks of a woman who has always loved, and always wanted to have children, but for whom the right opportunity—in terms of timing and a partner to co-parent with—did not come. Reasons for women deciding to become solo parents are formulated as *running out of reproductive time*, and as *not having the time to wait* for a (new) partner who might be a father to their child, although in most cases, the women state that they would have preferred partnered parenthood. One text explains a woman's decision to go to Denmark for insemination as follows: 'She was 34 years of age when she decided to get inseminated. The relationship with the love of her life was over and she went through a crisis: Was the dream about a family forever broken?' ('Jag kände mig som en brottsling' *Aftonbladet*, March 24, 2016).¹¹ Another states that '[h]er choice to become a mother on her own was also a great grief. She had visualised herself having a man by her side, but he did not turn up' ('Alla visste hur mycket jag hade längtat efter barn' *Expressen*, 3 May 2014), and one woman states that 'I still want to meet someone to have a child together with (...), but I'm 42 and single' ('Maria, 42, har ägg i frysen' *Aftonbladet*, 26 February 2015). The women's 'choice' to have a child on their own is here described as a necessity. One solo mother is quoted as saying: 'I wanted another child but I couldn't hang around and wait for a new partner, so after thinking it over for a while I decided that I would dare to do it by myself' ('Barnlängtande...' *SvD*, 16 January 2016).

Hence, solo motherhood is represented as a last resort, motivated by the ticking of the 'biological clock'—the women are becoming older and running out of time if they are to reproduce—and the lack of (time to

find) an appropriate partner to co-parent with. Often, too, the texts point to a specific age when the woman in question started longing, and planning, to become a mother: ‘When she was 29 years of age, she started to look into the opportunities [to have a child via ARTs]’ (‘Alla visste...’ *Expressen*, 3 May 2014). When the women see their situation clearly, the decision appears to be easily taken: ‘It was not a hard decision to take...I can no longer wait for meeting Mr. Right’ (‘Singelkvinnor kan få hjälp att bli gravida’ *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 May 2014). These quotations also stress the women’s “‘desire to parent’...[as] the ultimate justification for the use and development of ARTs’ (Faircloth and Gürtin 2018, 988). As one mother observes, ‘I had a much stronger longing for a child than for meeting someone to spend my life with’ (‘Alla visste...’ *Expressen*, 3 May 2014).

But ‘going solo’ via ARTs is also justified by statements about which routes to reproduction are morally appropriate. The cited solo mothers in our sample are positioned as honest, and therefore respectable women; they utilise ARTs instead of tricking a man into fatherhood. One woman explains: ‘I had a strong wish for a child but no partner... It didn’t feel OK to trick someone into parenthood’ (‘Splittras av barnfrågan’ *Aftonbladet*, 17 May 2014). Another woman states that she ‘didn’t want to pick someone up in a bar, and also take the risk of STDs’ (‘Jag blir en bra mamma – även utan en partner’ *Aftonbladet*, 22 January 2016), signalling a concern for her own health as well as a rejection of an amoral behaviour *vis-a-vis* an unknown man. Yet another mother comments that ‘I’d rather have a child by myself than with the wrong person’ (‘Ta någon bara, huvudsaken är att det blir en bebis...’ *DN*, 25 November 2017). As Skeggs points out, ‘[r]espectability contains judgements of class, race, gender and sexuality and different groups have differential access to the mechanisms for generating, resisting and displaying respectability’ (Skeggs 1997, 2). Not getting the ‘wrong person’ involved in co-parenting or in conception (or risking one’s health)—which can be understood as a care for the self and the future child—and refusing to ‘trick’ men into parenthood also contributes to the respectability of these women.

Whereas Skeggs explored how working class women aspire to the (unreachable) middle-class ideal of respectable femininity, the solo mothers in this sample are explicitly and firmly positioned as middle- to upper-middle-class women, for whom respectability—following Skeggs—should be a non-issue. Yet, perhaps due to their status as solo parents ‘by choice’, and hence likely to be perceived as more responsible—or ‘at

fault’—for their situation than those who are widowed or divorced,¹² newspaper representations demonstrate a need to affirm the women’s respectability in several ways.¹³ In the above examples, accountability and responsibility are central components in these representations. As observed by Faircloth and Görtin ‘[i]n a reproductive landscape that places such importance on parenting, “accountability” might be said to be one of the growing requirements of reproductive agents’ (2018, 989).

Not only does the solo mother avoid one-night stands, she is, overall, described as having planned her parenthood carefully. It is not a hasty decision, which is emphasised in several articles, as exemplified in an interview with a single mother who claims: ‘children who are the result of insemination of single mothers are longed-for and planned’ (‘Barnlängtande kvinnor söker sig utomlands’ *DN*, 16 October 2015). In another article, it is said that conceiving via donor procedure ‘is not an easy decision for the woman; it is very thought-through’ (‘Barnlängtande väljer Danmark’ *SvD*, 16 January 2016). Solo mothers often juxtapose their own well-reflected decision to become parents with what they perceive as the un-reflected-upon pregnancies of couples, suggesting, as Susanna Graham observes, that ‘the more one has thought about, questioned and accounted for something, the more responsible one is for taking that action’ (Graham 2018, 256). Such ways to refer to solo motherhood as responsible also adds to justifying it, and to making it a socially acceptable, respectable thing to do.

However, there are many hindrances and difficulties involved in becoming a solo mother. The much-planned and longed-for child may fail to be conceived, and time pressure may become acute. The news articles from 2017 to 2018, the years after the inauguration of the new law, repeatedly detail the obstacles these women face: long queues to treatment, lack of donor sperm and age restrictions that may cause women to ‘age out’ of eligibility for treatment. The news headings are illustrative: ‘Shortage of sperm all over the country’ (*SvD*, 8 January 2017), ‘A long wait for insemination for singles’ (*DN*, 7 August 2017) and ‘4 years of waiting’ (*DN*, 6 December 2017). Also, once treatment is accessed (either in Sweden, or self-funded commercial treatment elsewhere), successful results may take many cycles of treatment and much time. This becomes clear in three lengthy in-depth articles from 2017 to 2018 that follow women in their endeavours to conceive. These texts describe the treatments as costly and hard, with miscarriages and disappointments before a child was finally conceived, and all three women

had to go abroad for treatment due to legal restrictions (before 2016) or long queues (after 2016). One of the articles cites the solo mother Linda: ‘It has been overwhelming and hard emotionally as well as financially. At one stage, it felt like I lived two weeks at a time...[Linda] refers to the time around the summer 2016 and onwards, when she went to Copenhagen every month to be inseminated, at 8000 SEK per attempt’ (‘Singelmamman Linda ville ge Villem ett syskon’ *Expressen*, 20 January 2018). Another article is introduced as follows: ‘After ten attempts to become pregnant via insemination and IVF, single Cilla Holm became pregnant through egg and sperm donation in Russia’ (‘Så fort man blir gravid är man VIP’ *DN*, 15 June 2018). The articles illuminate the potential challenges of becoming a solo mother, but also offer happy endings in that all three women finally had children.

As previous research has shown, solo motherhood is often understood as a ‘last resort’ for women longing for motherhood; a ‘plan Z’ (Bock 2000; see also Layne 2015; Graham 2018; Volgsten and Schmidt 2019). In the data from Swedish newspapers, similarly, because there is no eligible future father around, and, crucially, because time is running out/the biological clock is ticking, the solo mothers in the sample are represented as *having had to* use ARTs and ‘going to Denmark’ if they are to become parents at all; they are not represented as taking the decision because they prioritised parental solitude or living an alternative family life *at the time*. However, as we shall see in the next section, in some instances the mothers do verbalize the benefits of parenting alone, and these benefits are predominantly raised in discussions regarding the place of a father in the life of their child, and in their own life as a parent.

MEN AS FATHERS VS. WOMEN REPRODUCING ON THEIR OWN

As Graham observes, ‘[t]he use of ARTs opens the decision to become a single parent to scrutiny, not only by women contemplating this family form, but also policy makers, “experts” working in the health and fertility industries, and external others’ (Graham 2018, 250.) In the sample, such scrutiny often centres on the place/role of men as fathers to children, and on solo mothers’ intention to parent without fathers.¹⁴ Concerns about men/fathers in relation to solo mothers are raised in editorials, columns and letters to the editor, and opinions differ strongly. One mother calls the donor ‘dad’, when she explains that she has travelled with her toddler

to meet ‘donor siblings’ in other countries because ‘even if her donor never presents himself, I want to do all I can for her to know there is family on her dad’s side’ (‘Vi hittade sju syskon via nätet’ *Aftonbladet*, 5 March 2014). Others are clear that a donor is not a ‘dad’ (‘Han är numero uno för mig’ *Expressen*, 26 July 2015), or completely dismiss the importance of fathers, since ‘[i]n Sweden there are thousands of children who for different reasons have access to only one parent. The notion that having two parents is always best for the child is an outdated idea that requires revision’ (‘Kärleken till barnet är det viktiga – inte antalet föräldrar’ *Aftonbladet*, 24 March 2016). In the entire sample, there is explicit criticism of solo mothers as such only in two texts. One is a letter to the editor which terms solo mothers ‘aberrant ladies’ (Sw. *aparta damer*; ‘Farligt vara utan pappa’ *Expressen*, 24 June 2014); the other a column which criticizes these women for depriving children of fathers (‘Alla måste ha rätt till sitt ursprung’ *Aftonbladet*, 21 April 2015). A couple of letters to the editor similarly deplore the offspring of solo mothers and emphasize the importance of fathers in the name of children’s sense of identity, hence indirectly criticizing the mothers.

Generally, however, the texts that present readers with individual solo mothers and their stories represent them as capable and resourceful individuals who take grounded decisions to become parents. Their decision is also presented as having had happy outcomes: solo mothers enjoy motherhood, and do not miss a male, second parent in their family lives. One mother explains that, instead of a father, her daughter has ‘many other adults around her. Among them a grandfather and a cousin who she really likes spending time with’ (‘Elna vet att hon inte har en pappa’ *Aftonbladet*, 29 May 2014); another mother states that her child has ‘many people around with whom she feels safe. I don’t know whether there would have been as many near ones if she’d had two parents’ (‘Alla visste...’ *Expressen*, 3 May 2014).

The solo mothers often question the idea that fathers are essential to a child. One mother emphasizes that children need ‘well-balanced adults’ and that ‘[a] parent should be trusting, present, loving...this is more important than having a father, as such’ (‘Jag kände mig som en brottsling’ *Aftonbladet*, 24 March 2016). A couple of the texts also include statements about the impossibility of missing what one never had, arguing that since children of solo mothers have never had a father, they cannot experience this as a lack in their lives. One letter to the editor states that ‘children who have never had a father run no risk of missing

him, unlike children who have been born to a couple but where the father takes off ('Barnlängtande kvinnor...' *DN*, 16 October 2015). In an interview with a mother and her adult twin sons, one brother recalls being sad as a child because he missed having a father, at which point his twin brother comforted him by asking whether he had forgotten that they had no father, reasoning that 'you cannot miss a dad who doesn't exist' ('Karin åkte till Danmark och fick tvillingar' *SvD*, 29 March 2016). Hence, solo mothers express themselves in ways that downplay the fact that 'It still takes a man to make a child' (Hertz 2006, xvii). One solo mother proposes that 'people are so used to single parents, or there not being a dad in the picture for various reasons, so I don't think people ask [whether there is a dad] these days' ('Elna vet...' *Aftonbladet*, 29 May 2014).

However, even when reaching the conclusion that fathers are 'not necessary', many (prospective) solo mothers reflect at length upon the place of fathers in families and in (their own) children's lives. This points to a particular ambivalence: the solo mothers are represented as determined that they can be as good parents as anybody else, but also as finding it necessary to verbalize ideas about men, fathers and the two-parent family. This may be an effect of journalists' interests and questions, or manifestations of the mothers' own concerns; we can only note that this is a reoccurring feature in the sample. The many, and at times substantial, reflections on missing fathers sets the sample on solo mothers apart from newspaper texts about single mothers by divorce/separation, where fathers are typically not mentioned (Bergnehr and Wahlström Henriksson 2020). The tendency is also in line with findings in Rikke Andreassen's 2018 study of how solo mothers speak of family in online communities. This element in newspaper texts suggests that solo mothers are subject to others' as well as their own questioning and critique in particular ways, often linked to the notion of 'erasure' of men and fathers. In the words of one solo mother, parenting on one's own 'does not mean that you don't want a father there, it's just the way life turned out. It's simply women who have done this because they've given up a little on the idea of finding someone to have children with' ('Barnlängtande väljer...' *SvD*, 16 January 2016). Such statements clearly respond to the criticisms that were voiced against the new law as possibly leading to men/fathers becoming superfluous as women reproduce 'on their own'.

As demonstrated above, in articles focusing on solo mothers, the place of fathers is debated. There is also much reflection about the meanings of

‘male role models’. All in all, the texts about solo mothers signal a need to temper (men’s and women’s) anxieties regarding the role of men in the contexts of families and parenthood. Such anxieties might be explained by the strong links between paternity and patriarchy—which we take to mean a legitimization of male dominance—a link that is in a sense broken by pregnancies via IVF and (anonymous) donor sperm.

Many solo mothers mention the possibility of meeting a male partner in the future, while also pointing out that a new partner does not equal a father/co-parent. This corresponds to findings regarding solo mothers in the US, whose male partners may, or may not be taking on a parental role *vis-a-vis* their children (Hertz 2006). Asked by a reporter whether she wants to find a man who can be a father to her daughter, one woman responds: ‘I do not want to meet a man in order for her to have a father...If I meet a man I think of him, first, as a person in the family. But I cannot decide about him being a dad or not’ (‘Alla visste...’ *Expressen*, 3 May 2014). Another woman says that she has ‘not closed the door on a romantic relationship, and if I meet someone I really want to live with I can invite him in to be a bonus dad’ (‘Jag kände mig...’ *Aftonbladet*, 24 March 2016).¹⁵ One mother states that she at first felt sad and awkward as an ‘involuntarily single mother’, but is also firm that ‘it would be unsound to look for a potential father rather than a partner’ (‘Han är numero uno...’ *Expressen*, 26 July 2015); another states simply that although during pregnancy she had hopes about eventually finding a co-parent, once she had twins ‘there was never even any time for thinking about meeting someone’ (‘Karin åkte till Danmark...’ *SvD*, 29 March 2016). At the time of being interviewed, no solo mother in the sample is involved with a male partner. Although some solo mothers speak about previous, and possible future, male partners, at the time when the articles are written, there is no such partner in their lives, which are described as fully focused on mothering (and, in some cases, domestic and professional work). In other words, the solo mothers are represented as exclusively focused on the mother–child relation, rather than as prioritizing a heterosexual relationship. Hence, these representations of solo mothers draw upon notions of respectable femininity (Skeggs 1997), also in that their femininity—and their motherhood—is de-sexualized. This is done both by separating parenting and sexuality in the act of conceiving via donor procedure, and by downplaying the place of sexuality/sexual partners in their present lives as parents.

While there are many instances of mothers reflecting upon the role of men as fathers, and upon their own route towards ‘going solo’, once they are single mothers, they realize the benefits, and find it works really well. In this sense, many solo mothers are portrayed as reformulating their initial ‘Plan B’ into a ‘Plan A’ once parenthood is achieved. One mother states: ‘I am very happy with the life I’m living now, I have the family I always dreamed of. And besides, I can make all the decisions without having to fight over who does what’ (‘Vi pekade ut som sämre föräldrar’ *Aftonbladet*, 21 April 2015). Another woman points out that since ‘I had been single for so long even before I became a mom – it was no great change to shoulder the responsibility [of twins] on my own... Since I have not had a man I have been able to be 100 percent mom. I haven’t had to be a lover and a discussion partner as well’ (‘Karin åkte till Danmark...’ *SvD*, 29 March 2016). Many mothers repeat the sentiment that they are happy to not have to argue with a co-parent about child-rearing, and state explicitly that solo motherhood is ‘mostly really nice’ (‘Ny lag...’ *DN*, 31 March 2016); they reflect that ‘[n]ow that I’m a parent I realize it is just fine [to be a single mother]’ (‘Alla visste...’ *Expressen*, 3 May 2014); ‘Everything has worked out just great’ (‘Elna vet...’ *Aftonbladet*, 29 May 2014), and that ‘it is absolutely fantastic being a mom, it has all gone much more smoothly than I had expected’ (‘Jag kände mig...’ *Aftonbladet*, 24 March 2016).

The representations often also foreground the mother’s honesty in relation to her child. Many solo mother narratives contain passages about how she explains their family life to the child. In these cases, the mothers express the importance of openness and the child knowing the circumstances of its conception. In the words of one woman, ‘I have been completely honest... For me, it has been crucial... I want her to know the truth’ (‘Vi hittade...’ *Aftonbladet*, 5 March 2014); another woman explains that her child ‘knows she has no dad, because I’ve told her’ (‘Elna vet...’ *Aftonbladet*, 29 May 2014). A small number of articles include the voice of a child, illustrating how they (at various ages) formulate the experience of being a donor-conceived child of a solo mother. Some children are described as speaking of themselves as ‘made in the baby factory in Denmark’ (‘Barnlängtande kvinnor...’ *DN*, 16 October 2015), or as coming from the same ‘daddy-seed’ or ‘gift-seed’ [Sw. *gåvosäd*] as their donor siblings (‘Vi hittade...’ *Aftonbladet*, 5 March 2014; ‘De har samma okända pappa’ *Aftonbladet*, 13 July 2014). One mother explains that she has been clear in communicating with her child that there is a donor,

but no dad, and speculates that her son may be angry with her about this at some future point, but that she will explain to him then that she could not find the right person ('Han är numero uno...' *Expressen*, 26 July 2015). These examples demonstrate the mother's (future) openness in discussing with her child, which we see as further contributing to maternal respectability, since it is linked to the ideal of honesty as well as to the thorough planning, reflexivity and intensity that marks (good) solo motherhood.

RESPECTABILITY AND INTENSIVE SOLO-MOTHERING

Respectability, we argue, is a central component of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), a maternal ideal that is heavily dependent on affluence in terms of wealth as well as time. The ideal is strongly connected to white middle- or upper-class women in the specific cultural setting from which it springs: the US (cf. Taylor 2011), but it is also a distinctive presence in the Swedish twentieth-century context in focus here (Bergnehr 2008; Elvin-Nowak 1999). The 'intensity' of solo mothers is signalled by their strict focus on their child/children. But intensive mothering is also signalled by the drawn-out temporal aspects of mothering. The 'intensive commitment' of these women begins even before conception (Graham 2018, 251); they are represented as perceiving themselves as 'pre-conception parents' who are 'expected to account for (and embody) an intensive commitment to parenting *before* becoming parents' (Faircloth and Görtin 2018, 990). Such temporal 'stretching' of motherhood, as Faircloth and Görtin have observed, is typical for how intensive mothering plays out in the realm of ARTs.

In part, intensive mothering is an effect of being a solo mother, for parenting alone is likely to be a consuming endeavour. But intensive mothering can also be seen to be represented in the sample in more positive terms, as *enabled by* solo motherhood. The sample contains several examples of mothers who speak quite contentedly of avoiding the 'hassle' linked to co-parenting. Once they have the experience of mothering a child (or children) on their own, they see the benefits of being the only parent and taking all decisions without any need to negotiate with a father as co-parent. Hence, the representations support the centrality of the mother-child dyad, and illustrate the understanding of family noted by Roseanne Hertz: 'the core of family life is the mother and her children' (Hertz 2006, xviii). In other words, even while intensive mothering posits an impossible ideal that creates a tremendous burden of responsibility (Hays 1996; cf. DiQuinzio 1999), it can simultaneously be understood as linked to issues of omnipotence and control, which may be perceived

as positive by the single parent. In the sample, no mother talks about intensive mothering as such, nor does any mother speak of the burden of mothering as overwhelming or even difficult. On the contrary, solo mothers are represented as embracing their motherhood and enjoying it.

In this way, newspaper representations suggest that intensive mothering is *achieved* by these women as a result of their status as solo. Where intensive mothering is an ideal, its achievement can be experienced as a success. This reminds us that intensive mothering, like respectability as such, is double-edged. As Skeggs points out, '[r]espectability, domestic ideals and caring all establish constraints on women's lives, yet they can also be experienced positively. They also reproduce distinctions between women: those who have invested in these constraints can feel superior to those who have not' (Skeggs 1997, 41). Hence, solo mothers, when represented as heavily invested in their carefully and thoroughly planned parenthood and as reflecting extensively on their life choices—as well as orientated towards maternity and away from sexuality—can be read as activating elements of respectability that serve to distinguish them from coupled mothers, as well as from other single mothers. Such distinction serves to refute the potentially suspect single motherhood of a woman who 'goes solo' (May 2001, 48). However, the strong focus on respectability in these representations can also be seen as triggered by an understanding of solo motherhood as more suspect, or 'at fault' (May 2001, 48) than other lone motherhoods in the context of any patriarchal society. In the context of Sweden, solo motherhood has to be carefully explained and negotiated in order to deflect suspicion, in part because it negates the centrality of paternity (which in turn is central to patriarchal orders), but also the contemporary ideals of 'involved fatherhood' and 'gender equal parenting' which are incompatible with the solo mother-family.

We have argued that representations of solo mothers are marked by concerns with maternal responsibility, respectability and intensive mothering.¹⁶ The representations of solo mothers in the major Swedish dailies are predominantly positive. Very few voices are raised in direct criticism of these mothers in the sample. These findings contrast with comparable studies in the UK, where solo mothers are predominantly negatively portrayed (cf. Zadeh and Foster 2016). Reasons for going solo via ARTs are a lack of appropriate male partner and reproductive time running out. Although represented as 'Plan B', outcomes of going solo are invariably happy families, a message strengthened by the imagery that accompanies the texts (smiling mothers, often with children in, or running into, their arms). Solo mothers who speak in their own voice enjoy motherhood once it is achieved, find it easier than anticipated, and have never been directly questioned about their choice. Throughout the material,

solo mothers demonstrate an orientation towards honesty, good planning and thorough reflection, and they are represented as well-informed and capable parents. This reminds us that the mothers in this category are a select minority of middle- to upper class women, who are relatively resourceful individuals. Also, it reminds us that ‘ARTs predominantly assist the reproduction of privileged groups...class context mediates not only women’s economic resources and access to reproductive care, but also their attitudes towards reproductive planning and control’ (Faircloth and Grtin 2018, 993). Finally, it is worth remembering that these mothers belong to the segment of the population most often visibilized in the Swedish daily press: the urban, white, heterosexual, middle class.

NOTES

1. For overviews of the sociological strand of the research on motherhood via ARTs, see, e.g. Almeling, ‘Reproduction’ (2015); Arendell ‘Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade’s Scholarship’ (2000).
2. However, a Danish study (Andreassen 2018) focuses in part on how Scandinavian solo mothers ‘mediate kinship’ in online fora.
3. 4.3% of births in Sweden are the result of ARTs; this figure includes couples and singles (figures for the year 2017; Q-IVF 2019). From 2020, statistics in this annual report will separate single women from couples. However, statistics do not give the full picture of parenthood achieved via ARTs since some, but not all, solo mothers (as well as couples) go through treatment in national health care.
4. The donor-conceived child has a right to find out who the donor is, while the donor does not have any right to know what child, or children, is conceived using the donated sperm. Whereas a National Board of Health and Welfare directive from 2005 stated that no donor should be used for more than six separate births, this rule was removed in 2010 (‘Svenskar flockas till danska bebisfabriken’ *Expressen*, 21 May 2015).
5. Worries were immediately voiced regarding the shortage of sperm donors in Sweden, which was already causing problems for hospitals providing treatment for couples; there was also a great shortage of egg donors (‘Befruktning av ensamstende mammor kommer att drja’ *Aftonbladet*, 7 March 2016; ‘Utlovad hjlp att f barn drjer’ *SvD*, 31 December 2016).
6. Denmark is a prime provider of donor sperm for international customers, and among international customers at Danish fertility clinics, Swedish women are in majority (Andreassen 2018, 77).
7. While a thorough comparison between representations in morning papers and evening papers, respectively, will have to be the subject of another study, we note that the numbers of texts in evening papers outnumber those in morning papers in 2014 and 2015, but that in 2016, morning

- papers publish on solo mothers more frequently, and at greater length, than evening papers.
8. 2014: 15; 2015: 17; 2016: 20; 2017: 8; 2018: 2 = 62.
 9. Skeggs' study *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (1997) theorized respectability on the basis of interviews with working class women. According to Skeggs' analysis, these women could strive to fulfil the ideal of 'respectability', but never quite succeed since the ideal as such is a middle-class formation to which these women are denied access.
 10. In the entire sample, only one mother describes herself as 'queer'.
 11. The translations of newspaper texts are ours throughout this chapter.
 12. Vanessa May observes that 'There exists also another hierarchy of lone mothers, based on the route into lone motherhood, which operates of the notion of fault: the widow is least to blame for her status, whereas divorced mothers can be blamed at least partly, and single mothers...are alone responsible for their lone motherhood' (May 2001, 48).
 13. Whether this is the need of the mothers in question, or of the journalists, we cannot say.
 14. As Graham also discusses, it is the intention to parent alone that raises suspicions about the solo mother. '[I]t is the intention of solo mothers to form a single parent family that is called into question by both the women themselves embarking upon this family form, as well as external others, and it is the intention for which they must be accountable. What counts as a "good" or "acceptable" account depends, of course, upon our socio-cultural assumptions, norms and ideologies of right, practical, or permissible conduct' (Graham 2018, 251–252).
 15. 'bonus dad' (*bonuspappa*) is a common phrase in Swedish to refer to a stepfather/extra father.
 16. Their respectability, furthermore, aligns them with the good mother-and-worker ideal that has been central to the development of the Swedish welfare state, for whom support and security is provided by the state rather than the family.

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