

## 'Intensive Mothering' Discourse in Narratives Pro and Against 'Daddy Quota' in Latvia

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**Abstract.** Motherhood in Western civilization bows to the dominant discourse of 'intensive mothering', coined by Hays. The burden (and privilege) of childcare and domestic duties, prominently placed in its 'natural' position – on the woman's shoulders – is slowly shifting towards a more liberal and equal division between partners, also engaging the father in taking care of the household and children. However, despite benefits for the child and woman from the father/partner participating in childrearing and menial household tasks, there is still resistance and a strong position towards 'traditional' gender roles in the family – upheld both by men and women. Therefore, in light of the new EU directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1158) otherwise known as the 'daddy quota', the aim of this research is to explore the evidence and influence of the 'intensive mothering' discourse on the argumentation in favour and against fathers/partners taking the non-transferrable parental leave to stay at home with their children for 2 months. A thematic analysis of comments in the most popular *Facebook* group for parents in Latvia regarding parental leave for the partner shows both support and resentment towards the directive, appealing to loss of income for the family, loss of a 'special-bond' between mother and child, woman's decision rights and fear of increased 'double shift' for the mother. The article provides an insight into the ways how the main arguments against the shift towards a more liberal and gender equality-oriented division of household tasks and childcare are rooted in the 'intensive mothering' discourse.

**Keywords:** daddy quota, *Facebook*, intensive mothering, motherhood, social media

### Introduction

The burden (and privilege) of childcare and domestic duties in Western civilization, including Latvia, is still prominently placed in its 'natural' position – on the woman's shoulders. Even though society is slowly shifting towards a more liberal and equal division between partners, also engaging the father in taking

care of the household and children, the dominant discourse of motherhood is still anchored in 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996; Hallstein 2006). The ideology insists that parents, especially mothers, invest "more than usual amounts of physical and emotional energy into specific activities and practices with children", as well as put their own needs and interests last, or undertake "enormous risks" while maximizing their potential for success (Das 2019, 499; Steiner, Bronstein 2017, 3). The mother is "entirely responsible for the social, psychological and cognitive well-being of her children" (Feasey 2017; Budds, Hogg *et al.* 2017). 'Intensive mothering' also reinforces traditional gender norms, where the father is seen as the 'bread winner' and sole earner of family's income, while the mother concentrates on household tasks and childrearing (Schoppe-Sullivan *et al.* 2017, 277), it also supports the 'pro-natalist' position and medicalization or motherhood experience (Tiidenber, Baym 2017, 2). Moreover, the joy of giving birth and raising children is seen as the woman's ultimate fulfilment and any sharing of experiences of dissatisfaction with the transition to motherhood is considered taboo, as it is essential to maintain a good mother's image of oneself (Cronin-Fisher, Sahlstein 2019).

Even though the perfect image of a 'traditional family' portrayed in the discourse of 'intensive mothering' is based on a very narrow group of society, it has created a benchmark against whom all mothers and families are being measured (Cronin-Fisher, Sahlstein 2019, 158). The reality in many European countries, including Latvia, differs from this idealized norm and it echoes in diminishing birth rates, small number of children in a family, high divorce rates, etc. The number of childless couples has increased and the number of families with 3 children has decreased over the period of last 50 years (Trapezņikova 2019, 26–33). Ties between generations are weakening as, for instance, only 14% of respondents with children under 14 have received regular support in childcare from relatives, friends or people living outside their household. during a 12-month period (Trapezņikova 2019, 50). The most typical form of family in Latvia in 2021, out of 503.1 thousand families, is a solo parent with one or more underage children (24%), followed by couples without children (22.4%), whereas only 8.1% were married couples with children; moreover, Latvia has the leading position in divorce rates in EU (CSB 2021, 2–15; Trapezņikova *et al.* 2019, 65–68). Furthermore, even though in Latvia there are signs of improvement in gender equality, 68% of respondents in Latvia feel that women can take care of children better than men (Trapezņikova *et al.* 2019, 47). The distribution of household chores also is also uneven as on average (in EU) the women who work full time, devote additional 19 hours per week, taking care of the common home, compared to men who usually spare 10 hours a week; thus, the 'second-shift' at home, followed by burnout and exhaustion, is a still topical problem of the modern-day mother (Belle 2016, 11; Hirschfeld, Machung 1989). Lastly,

in Latvia on average every third woman has suffered from abuse and violence at home, and the number had even increased during the pandemic (CSB 2022). The discourse of 'intensive mothering' does not deal with these or other 'abnormalities' and deviations from the idealized version of a family.

To sum up, despite benefits for the child and woman from the father or life-partner participating in childrearing and menial household tasks (Bergman, Hobson 2002; Dunatchik *et al.* 2021), there is still resistance and a strong position towards 'traditional' gender roles in the family – perpetuated both by men and women. Therefore, in light of the new EU directive (European Parliament 2019) otherwise known as the 'daddy quota', the aim of this research is to explore the evidence and influence of the 'intensive mothering' discourse on the argumentation in favour and against fathers/partners taking the non-transferable parental leave to stay at home with their children for 2 months. There are two research questions:

1. What are the main arguments against or reservations about the new directive and individual entitlement towards parental leave in comments in *Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums* ("Responsive Mums' Club" from September 2021 to June 2022)?
2. In what forms does the 'intensive mothering' discourse emerge in the arguments in these comments against the 'daddy quota'?

## Research design

A thematic analysis of comments to posts in the most popular *Facebook* group for parents in Latvia (*Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums*) regarding the parental leave for fathers was carried out, concentrating on the posts from September 2021 to June 2022. In the period of 9 months (bearing in mind that the deadline for incorporating the EU directive was already established) there were 77 posts in total that appeared in search using keyword 'parental leave' and 197 posts appeared with the keyword 'father', most of which dealt with problems the mothers faced with parental leave or relationships with their partners. After removing duplicates from both these searches, only 5 addressed the question of non-transferable parental leave, of which 4 had comments. These 4 posts were included in the sample. Then, a quantitative content analysis was carried out to articles in the most popular news portal in Latvia – *Delfi.lv*, and one of the leading portals dedicated to the family theme – *Mammamunteti.lv*, focusing on the same period of 9 months. The articles were found by carrying out a search by keyword in both portals, filtering out the precise date and then going through all articles one by one. The results of both these samples were analysed and compared.

## Results

### 1. Thematic analysis of comments

As illustrated in Figure 1, the sentiment, expressed in the sample of *Facebook* comments regarding the non-transferrable parental leave, ranges from positive to negative, and, except the comments below *Post 2*, approximately a half of the expressed views are neutral or pose a question, as technical details about changes in the parental leave had not been fully disclosed to the society at the time. It is, however, obvious that regarding views in favour or against the non-transferrable parental leave for fathers, the respondents are leaning towards negative views. An important aspect is that the absolute majority of the users which are commenting in the posts bear female names.

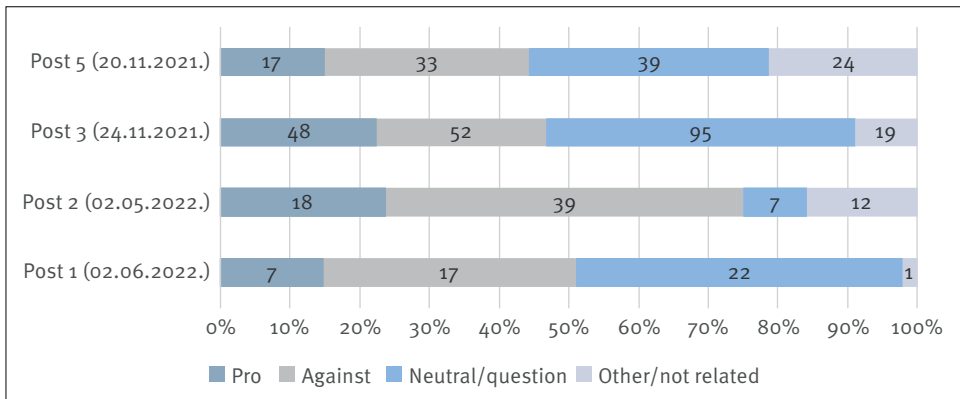


Figure 1. Sentiment expressed in *Facebook* comments regarding non-transferrable leave

Analysing the comments in detail, several themes emerge concerning opportunities or problems for 1) the mother, 2) the father, 3) the child, 4) the employer and government. First of all, regarding the changes brought by the proposed directive to mothers, there are several threads of thought. There is a lot of anxiety regarding the position of single mothers and how the changes will affect their livelihood, expressing fear that the mother will simply lose 2 months of paid leave. However, the main arguments form around the dominant position of mother as a ‘natural’ caregiver in contrast to fathers, complying with the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’. As illustrated in Figure 2, there are three main arguments: 1) breastfeeding and how the new directive will deprive the mother of the chance to breastfeed the baby, 2) mother’s instinct and bond with the child (as opposed to the lack of that instinct in the father), 3) the choice of mother to do as she wishes with her child (superiority of mother and ‘natural’ position at home).

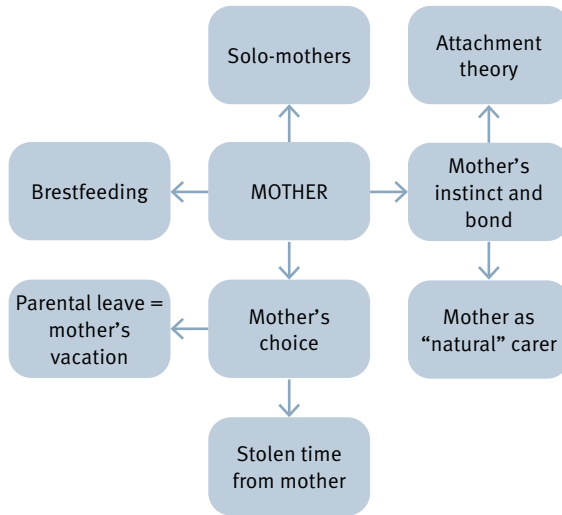


Figure 2. Thematic analysis of Facebook comments: arguments regarding the position of mother

Comments feature detailed descriptions of ‘attachment theory’, – how mother has ‘figured out’ the child and how the ‘clueless’ father would simply be overwhelmed by the new and unfamiliar responsibilities that are not suited to his abilities. The parental leave is also referred to as ‘mother’s vacation’; some responses even show outrage at the thought that the mother would have to return to work, or at the fact that this new regulation would ‘steal’ from the mother the time with her child, which is rightfully hers. Thus, the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’ can be observed especially in arguments against the new regulation, showing support of the woman being the primary caregiver. The limited number of comments supporting the directive speak mainly of mothers’ careers and workload at home that could be eased with the help of father, thereby differing from the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’.

Similar arguments have been presented in comments, expressing concern about the new changes to the role of father, illustrated in Figure 3.

Some comments simply state that the already existing paternal leave is sufficient, and no changes are necessary. Then, there is fear of fathers’ incompetence and untrustworthiness, portraying fathers as violent, prone to alcoholism or simply lacking any parenting or nurturing skills. There are also comments supporting the view that fathers are simply ‘not interested’ in childcare or unavailable because of responsibilities at work. The ‘intensive mothering’ discourse also emerges in these comments, especially in arguments against the new directive, as the father is seen as the ‘breadwinner’ of the family and two months at home would cause immense damage to the family’s financial stability. Some comments

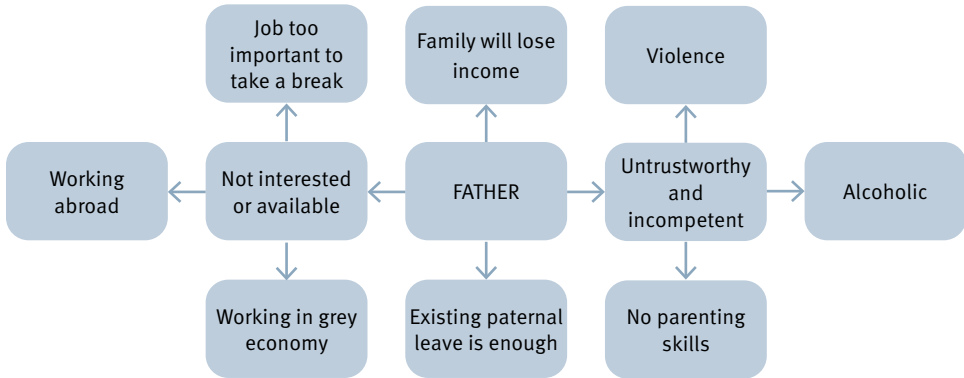


Figure 3. Thematic analysis of Facebook comments: arguments regarding the position of father

also feature doubt whether the father would be able to devote time to parental leave because of employment abroad. Arguments that support the directive accentuate the positive features of fathers staying at home with the child, a growing bond and strengthening of relationship; however, they are in minority.

Next, there are comments concentrating on the needs of the child and proposing arguments about 1) depriving the child of the mother’s love; and 2) being left in unsuitable (father’s) care, thus, experiencing stress. Then there are some comments expressing fear that the child would experience double stress because of a ‘new’ caretaker (father) and adaptation to kindergarten which could coincide with the leave the father would take.

Lastly, there is a relatively smaller string of comments, expressing preoccupation with the problems for employers that the new directive will cause. There is a concern regarding the nuisance caused by change in regulation and how the substitution of an employee for up to 2 months is ‘unmanageable’. However, some comments express fear of fathers losing their job or the employers making excuses not to grant the leave, mentioning fathers working in grey economy or abroad. Some commentators also express distrust in government, hinting that these new regulations may be part of some conspiracy or simply a demonstration of incompetence. Therefore, the ‘intensive mothering’ discourse is also imminent in all comments expressing doubt or distrust towards the new regulation, accentuating the prospective negative effects of changes upon the child’s wellbeing (father as an unsuitable caretaker, mother – deprived of her ‘rightful’ position at home etc.), the family’s overall financial situation (losing money due to father taking paid leave etc.), as well as overall uneasiness with change to the system that would encourage the father spend time with his child at home, while the mother could return to the workforce. Arguments that rather uphold a positive view of the directive lean towards a more liberal and less traditional

view regarding mothering and division of household tasks, thereby differing from the 'intensive mothering' discourse.

## 2. Content analysis of articles

In addition to thematic analysis of comments on *Facebook* posts in the group *Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums*, a quantitative assessment aiming to establish whether the theme of changes in regulation regarding parental leave and, particularly, the non-transferable two months had appeared in mass media was carried out through content analysis. The analysis focused on articles from the same period (from September 2021 to June 2022) on two media outlets: *Delfi*, one of the most popular portals in Latvia (Gemius 2022), and *Mammāuntētiem.lv*, also among Top20 of the most popular portals in Latvia, which mainly deals with family-related topics (Gemius 2022).

In the period of 9 months, the keyword 'father' (*tēvs*) appears in 25 articles, which focus on a variety of themes from single parenthood to the role of father in the family, as well as child custody debates and abuse; only 2 articles mention paternity leave. Meanwhile, in *Delfi* during this period the search by keyword 'father' yielded 26 articles, none of which were solely dedicated to the changes in parental leave, but instead mainly discussed the issues with child custody, alcoholism or tabloid scandals. The keyword 'parental leave' (*bērna kopšanas atvaļinājums*) appears in 51 items in *Mammāuntētiem.lv* and 35 items in *Delfi* in total, of which 9 in *Mammāuntētiem.lv* and 5 in *Delfi* mention the changes in regulation regarding the non-transferable parental leave months.

To sum up, during this period, there were more articles in total focusing on parental leave than on fathers, however, most of these articles were dedicated to the troubles faced by mothers. Although the number of articles regarding changes in the regulation is relatively small, all the articles are either neutral or concentrate on the benefits of non-transferrable leave and extra time for the father to spend bonding with the child and engaging in family life. Thus, even though the majority of articles containing the keyword 'father' focus on various problems from impertinence to abuse, and while articles regarding 'parental leave' predominantly view the problems encountered by mothers, the articles informing about parental leave tend to focus on either technical details and uncertainties, or on the fact that change will bring positive results for the family.

## Discussion and conclusions

After conducting a thematic analysis of comments in the most popular *Facebook* group among parents in Latvia (*Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums*) regarding the changes in parental leave from September 2021 to June 2022, it is evident that approximately half of the comments expressed a neutral opinion or posed a lot of

questions regarding the 'daddy quota'. Even though the EU directive regulating a non-transferrable part of paid leave for both parents was passed in 2019 and was supposed to be set into action by August 2022, parents were not informed about the technical details and the effects on their livelihood; this also coincides with the results from the quantitative content analysis that shows a limited number of articles explaining the benefits of the directive in one of the most popular news sites in Latvia *Delfi* and *Mammāmundētiem.lv*. Negative comments in *Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums* outweigh the positive ones, complying to the dominant discourse of 'intensive mothering' – positioning the mother as the 'natural' carer for the child, and the father – as the 'bread winner' of the family, unable or unwilling to tear himself away from work, or being unsuitable as a primary caregiver due to lack of 'mother's instinct', absence of nurturing capabilities or character flaws. The benefits to the child, more positive work-life balance for both parents, equality and other issues were recognized only in a handful of comments. Negative comments display confusion, fear, distrust and anger, some even spread disinformation and conspiracy theories about the Latvian government. Therefore, in light of the existing dominance of the 'intensive mothering' discourse, it would have been beneficial for the institutions in charge of introducing the changes in parental leave to have invested more time and resources in starting the dialogue with the society and proactively addressing the questions from parents, stressing the benefits to be brought by the changes. Further research is needed, exploring whether the tone of conversation in *Atsaucīgo māmiņu forums* shifts as more information is disclosed about the changes yielded by the new directive, as well as the differences observed in other, less popular forums or social media platforms. The research would also benefit from a more extensive and longitudinal quantitative content analysis of media articles, as the deadline for passing of the directive approaches, exploring the reactions of media and society when the directive will finally be implemented, and whether the dominance of 'intensive mothering' discourse will be challenged by a more liberal narrative, as the society gets accustomed to the changes.

**Author's note.** This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science in the framework of the project "Jeopardizing Democracy through Disinformation and Conspiracies: Reconsidering Experience of Latvia", No. lzp-2019/1-0278.

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