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**Mothering for discipline and educational success: Welfare-reliant immigrant women  
talk about motherhood in Sweden**

**Author**

Disa Bergnehr

PhD, Senior Lecturer

**Contact details**

School of Health and Welfare

Jönköping University

551 11 Jönköping

Sweden

E-mail: [disa.bergnehr@ju.se](mailto:disa.bergnehr@ju.se)

Phone: +46 763-91 77 30

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**Abstract** (150 words)

This study is based on 16 immigrant welfare-reliant women's discourses on motherhood in five focus groups. The women connect their mothering strategies for promoting discipline and their children's educational success with living on scarce finances: welfare dependence, children's education, and discipline are intertwined and recurrent themes that the interviews prompted. A dominant argument is that discipline diminishes the risk of school failure and

deviant behaviour. Educational success is imperative for the children's chances to obtain employment and self-provision as adults; deviant behaviour must be stifled to avoid criminal activities, school failure, and future welfare dependence. The women argue that Swedish society obstructs their mothering through lax discipline in school, a disregard for parental authority, and restrictive welfare stipulations. They desire better support. This study widens our understandings of immigrant women's experiences of mothering on welfare, and informs political decision-makers and professionals in their work to develop supportive services for migrants.

**Keywords:** forced migration; immigrant mothering; welfare dependence; schooling; social policies

## **Introduction**

Motherhood is a social, relational and embodied status, connected to certain practices and attributes that depend on the situation and context. Mothering entails the mother's practices in relation to the child and/or what she does to provide, foster, and care for the child. Mothering is intertwined with motherhood; it is formed by the social, cultural, material, and political environment. In turn, mothering practices evolve through the strategies individuals adapt in relation to these contextual factors. Migration to a new country means that the mothering must be adjusted to novel circumstances – this involves a melding of previous experiences and customs with new social structures and ideals (Awad et al., 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2004; Wu, 2011).

The present study explores Swedish-Iraqi, long-term welfare-dependent women's discourse on mothering in the process of resettlement due to forced migration. More knowledge is needed about acculturation strategies and experiences of migrant parents

(Dimitrova et al., 2014). This study contributes to such knowledge. Processes of resettlement in relation to motherhood have been scarcely explored, and Scandinavian research on the topic is nearly non-existent. While previous studies predominantly explore migrant mothering among women in paid employment or husband-supported stay-at-home wives, this study involves mothers whose families depend on social assistance. Migration is studied within a number of scientific disciplines, and the research field of migration is interdisciplinary. The present study is inspired by previous research on migrant mothers' experiences, emanating from a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, women's studies, psychology, psychotherapy, and sociology. Feminist work has informed the theoretical departure and analytical conduct.

### ***Consequences of migration***

Migration entails positive and negative outcomes on life and self; certainly, it entails change in many aspects. Acculturation – the 'process of cultural and psychological change (...) following intercultural contact' (Berry, 2007, 69) – is formed by the societal structures of the new country, as well as by the experiences obtained in the country of origin. It also depends on individual characteristics and strategies (Castles, 2003; Sam, 2014). Thus, the outcome of acculturation is complex, and requires empirical investigation (Berry, 2007).

Class and socioeconomic status appear to have great influence on the experiences of migrant mothers. It has been suggested that upper-class women have the means to sustain their pre-migration life with a high material standard, including nannies, housekeepers, and travels abroad (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). This can also be the case for highly skilled professional women (Manohar, 2013). Women of middle-class background, on the other hand, often experience downward social mobility and unfamiliar mothering challenges due to migration. Leaving a middle-class position as a stay-at-home wife or a professional in

their country of origin, they are often faced with full-time, low-paid occupations and less time to care for their children and household. The ideals of mothering they had practised pre-migration as well as those predominant in middle-class parenting in the Western context are difficult to pursue (Kim et al., 2006; Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005; Park, 2008; Wu, 2011). Liamputtong (2006) applied the concept of ‘double burdens’ to suggest that immigration involves additional strains on mothers: the transition to motherhood is a challenge in itself, but becoming or being a mother in a foreign country involves further burdens.

The loss of the support system provided by the extended family network adds to the strains of immigrant motherhood (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). The ‘role of local sources of support in combating loneliness and isolation as well as providing practical assistance’ must not be overlooked (Ryan, 2007, 297; see also Boyd, 1989). Migrant women who receive practical and emotional support from nearby relations appear to find employment and maternal duties easier to combine satisfactorily, while those with less support risk feeling disempowered as mothers, socially isolated, and lonely (Benza & Liamputtong, 2014; Park, 2008). From an American perspective, Llerena-Quinn and Pravder Mirkin (2005, 94) have argued that: ‘Many of the functions fulfilled by the kin system in the countries of origin are replaced in the United States by distant, impersonal, governmental institutions. Although social supports are needed, immigrant mothers report a sense of fear, confusion, and disempowerment when their values clash with the agencies that are meant to help them’.

Cross-cultural mothering and resettlement processes involve specific aspects of motherhood. Non-Western migrant mothers often face the dilemma of embracing the Western ideal of independence, while continuing to value the family unit and the interdependence that characterize many non-Western cultures (Awad et al., 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2004). While it is not uncommon for migrant women to disregard some of the ideals found in the new culture,

deviating from the majority norm can have consequences. Dominican mothers living in Spain had to face a situation in which ‘their shared cultural ways of correcting and punishing children became labelled as mistreatment by social workers’ (Jiménez-Sedano, 2013, 171). Majority childrearing has been defined as lacking discipline and respect for adults, for instance by Mexican and Korean working-class mothers living in the United States. The women argued that they, through firmness and discipline, provided security and kept their children away from drugs, criminality and gangs (Bermudez et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2006). Many migrant families are faced with living in deprived neighbourhoods on scarce finances. In addition, they face the challenge of trying to protect their children from discrimination and prejudice while also imparting to them that future goals and upward mobility can be achieved through an adaptation to the majority culture and educational achievement (García Coll & Pachter, 2002).

Migrant mothers emphasize the importance of educational success for their children’s future prospects. Education that enables the child to obtain a well-paid occupation can be a motive for migrating. Although labour migration for middle-class mothers renders downward social mobility, their child’s educational success promises regained social status: it is the means to a better future (Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005; Wu, 2011). However, parents’ insufficient mastery of the majority language can be a barrier to adopting strategies that could support their children’s school achievement (Kim et al., 2006; Liamputtong, 2006; Park, 2008). Tsai et al. (2011, 95) state that ‘many felt that the responsibility for ensuring that their children receive appropriate education and develop proper behaviour is too heavy and difficult for them due to the language barrier and their own low education’.

Although migration certainly entails change in several ways, change can be conceptualized as being connected to notions of continuity, in accordance with Gedalof’s (2009) theoretical outlining. Immigrant mothers adapt strategies that aim at ensuring stability

in terms of finances and prosperous futures for their children. Thus, 'new' is not necessarily connected to 'different' but rather to continuity; that is, to the continuous mothering work done to foster, care and organize life in order to create beneficial circumstances for one's offspring (Gedalof, 2009).

### **Purpose of the study**

The acculturation strategies of forced migrants have been under-researched (Castles, 2003), as have those of migrant parents (Dimitrova et al., 2014). Furthermore, there are very few studies on immigrant experiences of long-term welfare dependence (Bergnehr, 2015). The overall purpose of the present study is to narrow this gap, by exploring the discourse of Swedish-Iraqi mothers whose families are or have been dependent on social assistance for several years. The research questions in focus were: What recurrent topics and themes about mothering does the women's talk entail? How do the women depict their mothering strategies, and future aspirations for themselves and their children? In what ways is welfare dependence connected to their mothering?

### **Women in context**

It appears imperative to outline some of the characteristics of Swedish society in order to present overarching structures that influence its residents, including migrants. Approximately 16 per cent of Sweden's population were born in another country. Of this group, half were born outside Europe, the largest group by far in Iraq. Iraqis have been granted residency in Sweden as refugees, beginning during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and continuing with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and onwards. Recent figures show that the average age of Swedish-Iraqis is 35 for women and 36 for men (Statistics Sweden, 2014). Thus, many people of Iraqi origin are in their family-formation years and reside with dependent children.

Iraq is a war-struck country with internal as well as external conflicts. Sweden, on the contrary, has not been at war for the past 200 years, and has no current history of armed conflicts between groups of different religious or ethnic affiliations. Sweden is (in)famous for its individualistic culture with a strong and supportive social security system (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015). People from non-Western nations, on the other hand, generally promote family and community values to a higher degree (Awad et al., 2013; Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005). In addition, Swedish gender equality policies promote women's rights – for instance to education, labour force participation, and financial self-provision – more than most other nations around the globe (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014). The gender equality policies influence the everyday lives of all residents of Sweden; while they offer opportunities for women, they can also be regarded as restricting people's options and as being in conflict with other family systems and gender ideologies.

The Swedish social security system (e.g., sick-leave insurance, unemployment insurance, parental leave insurance) is individualized, with remunerations based on the person's previous earnings. Mothers and fathers with children over the age of one year are equally obliged to seek work. If they find work, their preschool children are guaranteed a place at a child-care centre, and children of primary-school age attend the after-school recreation centre. Child-care facilities are available at low cost, and around 95 per cent of children two to five years old attend out-of-home child-care on a daily basis (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014).

Since the 1970s, Swedish immigration policies primarily grant residency to people fleeing war, conflict or persecution, and/or for humanitarian reasons, with the exception of Nordic neighbours and EU residents, who are permitted to migrate for labour (Sainsbury, 2012). The policies are inclusive in that they provide social rights similar to those of Swedish citizens, for instance the right to welfare benefits (Sainsbury, 2012). However, society fails in

providing equal opportunities in terms of employment and education; a large proportion of the immigrant population face long-term unemployment and dependence on social assistance (Bask, 2005; Bergnehr, 2015; Hammarstedt, 2009). The average income among immigrants is considerably lower than among ethnic Swedes (Bergnehr, 2015), and poor families are largely of foreign origin (Save the Children, 2012). Many immigrant families reside in low socioeconomic status areas, and a high proportion of their children do not reach the national educational goals (Statistics Sweden, 2007). Moreover, individuals born in non-Nordic countries face more health problems than natives do (Bask, 2005).

Newly arrived immigrants with no assets, and with residence permits based on asylum, receive an introductory allowance that is intended to sustain them, conditional on their participation in Swedish language studies and trainee programmes. After a couple of years, if these immigrants are still unemployed and in need of financial support, they must apply for social assistance and adhere to the Social Services Act. Welfare recipients are generally not allowed to have assets, such as savings or properties, for example a house or car. Adult members of the household must be available to accept offers of paid work, actively seek employment, and take part in trainee programmes or other activities offered by the Social Services and Employment Agency. Welfare benefits are withdrawn for individuals who fail to comply with the regulations (Social Services Act).

## **Methodology**

This study is part of a wider project on parent support in multicultural neighbourhoods. The project originated from national, governmental directives aiming at helping local authorities develop parent support services. A research group was asked to investigate the experiences, needs, and wishes of migrant parents. The following sections present the theoretical departure, data, and analytical procedure of the present study.

### ***Theoretical departure***

The theoretical departure of this study is influenced by Gedalof's (2009) theorizing. Gedalof illuminates resettlement as a social phenomenon that entails the (re)construction of everyday family life. Through individual strategies for sustaining continuity, generating feelings of belonging and home, and adapting, the mix of new and old influences results in altered ways of living, and in reconstructed mothering strategies. The purpose of the altered practices may be similar or identical to the intentions of the mothering strategies in the country of origin; thus, continuity is interlaced with change (Gedalof, 2009). The presuppositions of the present study are as follows: 1. Mothering is contextual – it is influenced by cultural as well as socioeconomic factors; 2. Mothering strategies are under continuous reconstruction; 3. Migration forces mothers to reconstruct their mothering and to adjust their strategies to new societal structures. This involves the reconstruction of subjectivity: women may redefine what motherhood entails and should entail; 4. Notions of continuity and change are interlaced – new mothering practices may be adapted in order to sustain continuity in values and future aspirations; and 5. Mothering practices are (unconsciously or consciously) connected to the past and present, to mothering in the country of origin, and to dreams and wishes for the future for oneself and/or one's children.

### ***The focus group data***

The present study analyses material from five focus group interviews with a total of 16 mothers. The women were recruited from their children's schools, and from adult leisure activities that the municipality offered immigrant women. The data collection was initiated after the ethics committee had confirmed its approval, and informed consent was obtained

prior to the interviews. In the present text, personal details are excluded and pseudonyms are used.

The interviews lasted one to two hours. They were held mainly in Arabic, with the assistance of an interpreter, who worked in the community as a second-language teacher at the school and as an organizer of events such as sport activities and sewing classes for migrant women. The interpreter played a great part in recruiting the participants, informing mothers at school and women attending the community services. Importantly, she was well known and respected by the women, who otherwise may not have chosen to participate in the study. Suffice it to say that the focus groups triggered such animated discussions that it was impossible for the interpreter to convey every statement or dialogue word for word. However, she transcribed the interviews verbatim, which allowed talk not interpreted to the moderator during the interviews to emerge in the transcripts.

The women who participated in the interviews had certain attributes in common: they were mothers; they originated from and had been raised in Iraq; they had migrated due to war; they resided in the same deprived, suburban neighbourhood; and they were or had been dependent on social welfare for many years. For all of them, the move to Sweden had engendered a vast decline in material standard and socioeconomic status. They had family (siblings, uncles, aunts, older children, parents, etc.) spread around the world, and through these transnational relations received information on how different social systems operate in different national contexts. A few of the participants were acquainted (these participated in the same focus group), but the majority were not. All but three of the women had children of primary-school age as well as additional children who were younger or older, or had even left home. One woman lived with her grown daughter; one woman resided with her adolescent child, while her grown children lived elsewhere. These two older women (with grown children) had lived in Sweden for 12 and 20 years, respectively; the others had arrived three

to nine years ago, with the exception of one woman who had lived in the country for just a year. Besides the two older women, the women were in the age range of 32-52 years. Three (Basma, Mazel, and Thamina) participated in two interviews (Interviews 1 and 2), at their own request because they wished to continue the discussion after the first interview. These groups contained other participants as well.

The questions guiding the discussions in the groups were: How do you find being a mother in Sweden? What do you think about your child's school and your relations to school staff? Are there any specific parent support services that you feel the government or local authorities should offer, and if so: why? Probe questions were asked. As is common in focus group interviews, in which the moderator's questions are open and semi-structured (e.g., Bergnehr, 2008), the questions triggered rather than determined the discussions. In this way, the participants were given great scope to guide the reasoning. The guiding questions stimulated free-flowing discussions. The sessions ended with the moderator (the author) asking how the participants had perceived the interview. I was struck by their positive and serious replies: 'Write about what we've said. Inform the politicians!', 'It was great sharing my experiences with others', 'I've never spoken about these issues before; it feels good'.

The topics raised in the five groups were strikingly similar, and were discursively explicated in a similar manner. They centred mainly on mothering in Sweden, challenges and opportunities, dreams and aspirations, and differences and similarities in relation to motherhood in Iraq. Focus group data often render recurring explications in relatively homogenous groups. That is, pertinent arguments are raised independently (Bergnehr, 2008). This phenomenon indicates that the study participants share similar experiences, and have similar discursive resources that facilitate their understandings of these experiences (Morgan, 1997).

### *Analytical perspective and conduct*

It is through language – discourse – that we socially produce and construct meanings in relation to the material world, our actions and emotions. Narratives about life, such as mothering practices, are not reflections of ‘actual’ events but rather interpretations and meaning-making processes related to these events (Freeman, 1993). The analysis of discourse involves the analysis of political, economic and social structures, as they play a role in forming our practices as well as our discursive understandings (Weedon, 1987). The societal context structures our lives, and the language constitutes our thinking, but the dynamic nature of discourse – the continued act of reinterpreting and negotiating the meanings applied to the signs (i.e., concepts, terms) – facilitates, and is evidence of, agency; it ‘enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it’ (Weedon, 1987, 31). As such, the interpretation of discourse has the potential not only to regard individual understandings but also to analyse these understandings as part of a wider, societal context, and as part of social change and development (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). The notion of mothering as dynamic and under (re)construction, and that this (re)construction can be scrutinized through the exploration of discourse, is the basis of the present study.

The current analysis concurs with the understanding that focus group data are situated and context-dependent, and that language constitutes the ways we explicate our meaning-making in talk. Gedalof put it distinctly:

...the varied and variable positionings, power, intentions and preoccupations of researcher and researched, the specific conditions and circumstances of the research encounter, and the narrative and discursive resources available to all participants in the encounter will affect and inflect the results. (Gedalof, 2009, 83)

Moreover, focus group talk is understood as the outcome of a ‘process of collaborative sense-making’ (Wilkinson, 2003, 187). The content of the discussions is regarded as collective, co-produced stories. These stories inform us about how the women, in this specific situation, made sense of their experiences of resettlement and mothering. A narrative is always collective to some extent: it is told in a language that is shared with others, to others, under the influence of a specific sociohistorical location – narrating is a social process (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). In focus group interviews, this social process is pertinent since the discussion and group composition per se trigger the individual to engage in and reflect on different ideas and notions, to justify his or her position and to present arguments that affirm or reject what others have stated (Bergnehr, 2008). Furthermore, individuals who talk about their life tend to connect present events with the past and the future (Freeman, 1993). This becomes evident in the women’s stories about resettlement: their present lives as welfare-reliant immigrants in Sweden is recurrently compared to their past lives as stay-at-home, middle-class wives in Iraq, and discussed in relation to their future aspirations for themselves and their children.

As the interviewer, I am part of the co-production of data, being of a certain age, gender, ethnicity, and so on, and influencing the discussions with my guiding questions. As the analyst, I define research questions and select data excerpts that illuminate my main arguments. Although I, like the study participants, am restricted by the current discourse, I am, as they are, also an agent whose (re)interpretations are part of the continuous process of societal change and development (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; see also Bergnehr & Zetterqvist Nelson, 2015). With regard to studies on immigrant motherhood, research has the potential, and perhaps the obligation, to produce ‘valuable discursive resources for challenging the limitations of stories about migration’ (Gedalof, 2009, 82).

The analytical procedure in the present study involved close scrutiny of the women's talk as it appears in the interview transcriptions. Recurring and less dominant ways of reasoning were detected, and opposing and confirming instances acknowledged. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts. It was clear that the data were rich, and that several significant issues had surfaced. The analysis proceeded with the detection of instances about mothering. The following coding of instances discerned that mothering was predominantly connected to three topics: scarce financial resources, discipline, and children's school achievement. The reasoning was intertwined – different themes were related to one another, as they so often are in people's talk (Freeman, 2004).

## **Results**

Mothering on welfare and on scarce finances is a theme that saturates the other themes. For instance, strict discipline was depicted as a necessity caused by the family's scarce finances and low social status. Children's school achievement was imbued in reasoning about discipline, financial standard, and future prospects for upward social mobility. The results section begins with explicating talk about mothering on welfare, then goes on to discuss the women's reasoning around fostering for discipline with limited resources, and ends with an analysis of talk about mothering for educational success.

### ***Mothering on welfare***

A common topic of discussion in the focus groups was how the economic situation and material standard influenced mothering and family relations. Not being allowed to, or not affording, travel (to other cities as well as abroad), not being allowed to own a car (with restricted mobility as a consequence), and not being able to offer their children valuable leisure time such as sports or cultural activities (due to scarce finances and restricted mobility)

were recurrently referred to with frustration and concern. The women appropriated the ideology of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996): a resource-intensive mothering that has evolved into being the dominant ideal in many parts of the world, including Sweden (Bergnehr, 2008). But unemployment, scarce finances, and restrictive welfare stipulations made them incapable of practicing this ideal. As mothers, everyday life constantly reminded them of this, for instance when their children asked for clothes, commodities, and experiences they could not afford; as a mother, they could not provide a standard equivalent to the Swedish norm. As Tahira says:

When I say 'My darling, we can't afford it, we have the money we have', he says 'But I don't want to wear the same clothes today as I had yesterday'. The money you get for the child [the child allowance] is not much, it's too small. The money we get is not much because we depend on social assistance. We want to work but there is no work, what are we supposed to do? (Interview 3)

The women's reasoning repeatedly involves talk about material differences between families with a higher standard and those, such as themselves, with very limited resources. In the narratives, these differences were understood to affect the children negatively. The children became preoccupied with comparing their material standard with that of others, and, according to the discussions, were reluctant to acknowledge the fact that their parents could not afford what other parents could. The mothers expressed concern over the low material standard affecting their children's health. As Malika's and Taliba's reasoning goes:

Malika: When they [their children] see what the others have, they want the same. 'Buy me one of these.'

Taliba: But we live on social assistance. When parents can't afford things for their children, the children feel like something is missing, which affects them mentally. (Interview 5)

There are several combined aspects that cause the women to mention scarce finances as restricting their mothering. Examples of purchases the mothers cannot make, but which they regard as important aspects of good mothering, permeate the discussions; as does talk about scarce finances limiting mobility and family activities. For instance, Thamina said: 'Like with our income, if we should want to go somewhere we can't. We've been here [the city where they live] five years and can't go anywhere; we're stuck' (Interview 1). And in another interview, Rabiah stated: 'We can't take our children to experience another country, we can't go with them to Stockholm or Gothenburg, or to any other part, or to the zoo – it's too expensive' (Interview 3).

A deprivation of agency and mobility, engendered by the welfare stipulations rather than limited financial resources, also emerges in the talk. Krista's narrative exemplifies the reasoning that the Social Services hinder purchases, mobility, and her mothering aspirations:

Krista: Like now, when my poor son has gotten his driver's license, it doesn't matter if I spend less on me to save up for a car for my son. Whose name am I going to buy it in? They [the Social Services] don't even let us hire a parking place for our guests. (Interview 4)

Refugee immigrants in Sweden generally face several years of unemployment, and the Swedish welfare stipulations restrict their mobility and agency (Bergnehr, 2015). Mothering on welfare means mothering on dire means, but it also means that the money a person

receives is not for spending or saving as he or she wishes (Social Services Act). Thus, as the quote by Krista illuminates, the regulations restrict the women's aspirations to support their children. Research from other national contexts has suggested that migrant mothers spend a considerable amount of financial resources, as well as time and energy, on their children, to increase the children's chances for upward social mobility and future success in the new country (Kim et al., 2006; Wu, 2011). The narratives of the women in the present study propose that Swedish society obstructs such mothering aspirations of migrant women, due to the high unemployment rates among foreign-borns and the restrictions involved with being welfare-dependent.

### ***Mothering for discipline***

Discussion about living on scarce finances, and other life-changing consequences of resettlement such as diminished social support, relates to talk about mothering that fosters obedience and discipline. In turn, discipline is connected to children's future success – success being depicted as becoming an employable and self-sufficient individual with a well-paid job that provides increased material standard and social status.

One guiding question directing the focus group discussion concerned parental support. Support, as referred to by the women, meant the municipality providing leisure activities for the children after school hours, activities they themselves could not provide due to their scarce finances and limited mobility. Organized training in sports, music lessons, or similar activities involves quite considerable fees, and often requires that parents (or other adults) can take the children to and from the activity. Thus, not all families have the means to provide such activities. The women in the present study certainly did not, although their narratives accord with research emphasizing the positive impact such activities can have on children's learning and health (Ball, 2010). The quote by Rabiah gives voice to this sort of reasoning:

There is not much to do with your children in this city, and what does exist is expensive. There is nowhere to gather. For children older than ten, like the teenagers, these children and their families need support from school, so that they can take part in different activities. You have to do things for them, the school and the municipality, because this is a difficult age. (Interview 3)

Concerns about mothering with regard to the teenaged child are raised in the interviews. The women depict this stage as something they particularly worry about. Their worries are connected to a lack of money, which hinders them from being able to offer their children an organized leisure time. This would in turn decrease the risk of deviant behaviour, criminality and truancy, the women argue in accordance with migrant, working-class mothers in other national contexts (Bermudez et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2006).

The fostering of discipline and respect for adult authority is referred to in terms of mothering strategies of particular pertinence in Swedish society, where children have ‘too much freedom’. Different women, in different focus groups, use this same phrase – ‘too much freedom’. Discipline is also related to an absence of social networks and of an extended family and kin, as well as to the new, unfamiliar social context. Sara talks about the differences from living in Iraq:

We were acquainted with our neighbours. We spoke the same language and had the same traditions, which meant we weren’t worried about the children. But here, children hang out with Somalis, Pakistanis, Swedes, they hang out with Arabs who are Shia, Sunni, Syrians. The Christians blend, and I don’t know my children’s friends’ mothers, we’re not related. (Interview 3)

The reasoning in the interviews suggests that resettling in Sweden not only requires the mothers to be stricter with discipline, but also makes the mothering for discipline and obedience more difficult and imbued with risks. Sara continues:

When the children have lived here, they take a bit from everywhere until it's all a mixture, and their thoughts become different from ours. And this is the reason why I'm constantly worried, and constantly occupied with concerns about my child's future possibly being destroyed due to this. I'm very concerned.

(Interview 3)

Mothering for discipline, in a society that offers children 'too much freedom', can result in family conflicts that cause the children to turn against their parents. Several women talk about being worried their children will move away from the family as teenagers. The Social Services and the police are mentioned in these recurring discussions: the children may contact the authorities to inform them that their parents are too strict and controlling, causing the children to be placed in foster care, the women argue. But their mothering for discipline is meant to protect the children from harmful behaviour and future problems. This reasoning accords with previous research on migrant mothering strategies (Bermudez et al., 2014; Jimenez-Sedano, 2013; Kim et al., 2006). The women experience that their mothering is surveilled by the Social Services and that the social workers lack faith in their mothering capabilities, but that discipline and adult authority are imperative strategies for enhancing their children's chances for a prosperous future. The women connect discipline with caring and protective mothering work, as exemplified in the quote below:

Thamina: We don't mean our children any harm; we love our children and we're not dangerous, but our temper is a bit hotter than yours, and we don't have the same traditions.

Dima: We protect our children.

Thamina: We protect them. (Interview 1)

### ***Mothering for educational success***

Lack of discipline entails a risk for deviant behaviour and school failure, the women argue.

They propose stricter discipline not only in the home, but also at school. The schools, like the Social Services, should value discipline and acknowledge the benefits. The reasoning in the interviews is saturated with instances in which lax discipline in school is mentioned. Swedish schooling is compared to the education system in other nations:

Taliba: We witness children who don't behave well towards their teacher; they raise their voice or they do something, or they haven't done their homework, but there are no consequences for such behaviour.

Malika: They're not punished.

Taliba: While in the US and the UK – my brother lives in the US and my aunt in the UK – they're penalized, and then they get good grades. (Interview 5)

The women propose stricter discipline at school and connect this to school achievement.

School success is linked to their children's future prospects, and the women desire societal support in this regard. Lack of discipline risks educational failure, but educational success is important for succeeding in the new country. Despite their concerted efforts, the parents have not obtained jobs that match their education and previous experience; as the women depict the

situation, is it up to their children to be upwardly mobile through education, which facilitates employment. Higher education is the key to Swedish society, to paid work and increased standards and social status. Sawaha, for instance, said:

Their future, their opportunities, now it's up to them [the children]. As long as she doesn't become a cleaner, that's what's most important. Her father and I, we want what's best for her, and the man she marries may not be a good man, so everything may depend on her being strong and on her education. Yesterday, we talked to her. A week ago, my husband worked at a place [cleaning], and he said 'perhaps I'm as skilled as them, with all respect'. And he told C [their daughter] this yesterday, that you can get respect from people if you're nicely dressed like that [like they were at the place where he cleaned], and you get a good education, which is important for your sake. (Interview 5)

Sawaha's husband is an engineer, but works as a cleaner. His current job helps them stay off social assistance, although some people disrespect him for keeping such a job, according to Sawaha's narrative. Sawaha talks about her great concern for her daughter, who is having difficulty learning to read: 'The only thing I wish for is for the school to teach C to read, nothing else. It's my only wish in life. So I pray every night to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus that she'll learn, but she can't.' The child's difficulties in school are a great worry for the mother, as the girl's future success and wellbeing are highly dependent on her education. In addition, the quote contains the notion that the girl's future depends on her education and employment opportunities because 'the man she marries may not be a good man, so everything may depend on her being strong and on her education'. An emphasis on education is found in the interviews on the whole. The women are fully aware that education de facto

increases their children's chances of employment. In one of the interviews, Mouna explicates this:

Here in Sweden, education is the thing. If you're not originally from Sweden, a doctor is what you can be. For the Iraqis, only being a doctor will do. This problem isn't evident in Germany or London. As I see it, this is a problem in Sweden. (Interview 4)

Mouna states that medical school is preferable as it guarantees employment with a high salary and social status. Other university degrees that offer considerable chances of well-paid jobs are mentioned as well. It is crucial that their children make good enough grades to attend well-established programmes in higher education. The women compare what they depict as Swedish ideals with regard to children's education, and their own. Their aspirations of mothering for educational success are not necessarily encouraged by school personnel or the Swedish school system, according to the discussions. No school uniform, insufficient discipline, deficient transparency, and low ambitions are referred to as factors that obstruct the women's mothering strategies. Rabiah's account exemplifies what she has experienced as a lack of ambition in Swedish society and in some teachers' approaches:

Here in Sweden, when you graduate high school you might not proceed [to university], and you have a big party. We don't like this, because they [the children] have to continue to higher education; but there's a big party, that's what's important. There's a teacher at A [a school's name] who had a pupil whose father said: 'I want my daughter to go to university'. The teacher said: 'Why are you forcing her, she might not manage it'. The father answered: 'We

want our daughter to get a good education. We're not forcing her; she wants the same thing'. They [the teachers] look at it like we are forcing our children; but no, we regard a university degree as something very important. (Interview 3)

The women want the school to support their mothering aspirations with stricter discipline, but also with higher educational goals. They propose more transparency throughout the grades, starting from Year 1, as well as frequent tests that inform parents about their children's progress. Grades and tests offer knowledge of 'whether I need to study more with my child or whether I need to keep an eye on him' (Tahira, Interview 3). However, concerns emerge in the groups about difficulties assisting the child with homework and school-related tasks. Insufficient mastery of the Swedish language is cited as the main problem, but unfamiliarity with the Swedish school system and the applied pedagogy is also mentioned. In response to the moderator's question of how the women perceive motherhood in Sweden, Layla answers:

I believe I feel more responsibility, because sometimes I need to help my children with their homework, when they sometimes don't understand the task. They need help, but I can't help them – I myself, the one who needs to help them. That responsibility is somewhat hard; it really is. [Other participants confirm.] To help them with homework, not knowing the language, although I can see the task is easy; it's hard for me to explain to the children so that they understand. (Interview 2)

The women express frustration at not being able to support their children's educational achievement as they would like to, which is similar to how other migrant mothers refer to the

matter (Tsai et al., 2011). While the need to assist in their children's learning is greater in Sweden, and of greater relevance to the children's future opportunities than it would have been in Iraq, concurrently, difficulties in being able to provide help arose when they resettled, due to insufficient mastery of the Swedish language, reduced social networks, scarce finances, and welfare dependence.

## **Discussion**

The study participants in the present study were raised to be stay-at-home wives in Iraq. In the interviews, they appropriate the Swedish model that encourages female labour force participation and dual-earner families (Wells & Bergnehr, 2014). However, they have experienced great difficulty obtaining paid work, as have their husbands (Bergnehr, 2015). Unemployment has caused them to be dependent on welfare for years, which in turn has enforced an adherence to the social welfare regulations. Life on welfare involves limited economic resources, and restricted purchases and mobility. This affects their mothering.

Jiménez-Sedano (2013) has proposed that mothering should *not* be theorized as the result of primarily socioeconomic factors – cultural aspects of childrearing can be of equal importance. Still, the present study suggests that the families' socioeconomic status does indeed affect the adaptation and reinvention of mothering. The emphasis on discipline is part of the women's striving for upward mobility; for their children's futures to be made successful through educational achievement. The women are certainly influenced by their situation, which involves limited local support, scarce finances, and in some cases, the fading hope that they as a parent will ever be able to regain their former social status and material standard.

In Sweden, foreign-born individuals face higher risks of school failure (Bergnehr, 2012; Statistics Sweden, 2007; The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009), unemployment,

and discrimination than do ethnic Swedes (Bask, 2005; Bergnehr, 2015). However, formal education accomplished in Sweden increases the chances of employment (Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011). The women in the focus groups appear to be well aware of these facts, and refer to their mothering strategies accordingly. Indeed, their practices are contextualized. The women depict their mothering ideal in many ways as similar to middle-class Western-born women's (Bergnehr, 2008; Hays, 1996); but, being long-term welfare-dependent, they lack the means necessary to practise this ideal of intensive, resource-consuming motherhood.

Previous research suggests that migrants from the Middle East value the community rather than the individual, interdependence rather than independence (e.g., Awad et al., 2013; Tummala-Narra, 2004). However apt in its conclusion, the reasons for this may not be solely cultural but also might be a consequence of migration and resettlement processes. Migration results in a diminished local social network (Benza & Liamputtong, 2014; Boyd, 1989; Llerena-Quinn & Pravder Mirkin, 2005; Ryan, 2007). This, I suggest, could in itself cause parents to emphasize interdependence and family values rather than the ideal of independence that permeates the Western world. That is, the small social network one has comes to be of greater importance, emotionally and practically, to both parents and children. Thus, out of necessity grows the emphasis on interdependence and family values, and, feasibly as a consequence, discipline and parental authority.

There are similarities between the Swedish-Iraqi, forced migrant women's narratives in the present study and those of labour or marriage migrants in other national contexts. Minority status, the sense of exclusion, and low socioeconomic status restrain mothering, but also appear to engender the aspiration to secure one's children's upward social mobility through the promotion of educational success. But mothers are often restrained in their efforts to support their children's achievement: they lack time and energy as well as sufficient skills in the majority language (Kim et al., 2006; Liamputtong, 2006; Park, 2008; Wu, 2011).

Liamputtong (2006) has referred to immigrant motherhood as entailing ‘double burdens’. This may be an understatement. Women who mother with scarce finances and women who mother on welfare face additional burdens. Their mothering is restrained not only by limited resources but also by welfare stipulations that regulate mobility, purchases, and savings. The present study is unique in that it investigates migrant, welfare-reliant women’s talk about their mothering strategies and ambitions in the process of resettlement in Sweden. It widens our understandings of immigrant mothering in the Swedish context, and of immigrant social assistance recipients’ experiences of welfare dependence.

I wish to end this discussion on an important note: Migrant women are not only affected by downward mobility and restraints – they are also agents in understanding, appropriating, and refuting what they face (Gedalof, 2008). The present study holds a hope to have illuminated women’s agency in relation to socioeconomic and cultural constraints and opportunities. Migrant mothers adapt strategies they believe will be beneficial for their children’s future. They interpret and reinterpret motherhood and mothering in the process of resettling, and as such are agents who ‘give meaning to the world and act to transform it’ (Weedon, 1987, 31).

## **Conclusion**

The present study explicates how mothering on welfare, mothering for discipline, and mothering for children’s upward mobility through educational achievement are intertwined. Discipline is justified not only because it is the custom in the culture of the women’s birth, but also as a strategy to keep their children away from drugs, criminality and other deviant behaviour. The migrant women also connect discipline to school achievement: fostering for discipline is part of the mothering they do to encourage their children to focus on school. But Swedish society obstructs their aspirations. The women argue that Swedish society offers

children 'too much freedom'. First, lack of discipline and ambitions at school risk low grades and school failure. Second, the children learn to question adult authority, at school and at home. The mothers' efforts to encourage learning and schoolwork through discipline may be disregarded due to this disrespect. Third, mothering for discipline could cause the child to leave the family, or the Social Services to place the child in foster care, causing the family to dissolve. Moreover, the welfare stipulations and scarce finances place great limits on their mothering. Consequently, mothering for discipline and children's educational and future success comes across as being a delicate endeavour.

More research is needed in order to inform political decision-makers and practitioners. The outlining of support to families requires broader understandings of what migrant parenting involves. The present study investigates the experiences of Swedish-Iraqi mothers. The experiences of fathers, children and adolescents, from Iraq and other nations, in Sweden and other societal contexts, need further exploration. Furthermore, there is a great need to study the influence of long-term welfare dependence on families with minor children in general. It is also important to explore how being on welfare for an extensive period of time affects psychological and sociocultural acculturation processes, immigrant parent-child relations, and migrants' health and agency.

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