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# Raising teenage children in disadvantaged neighbourhoods: the experiences and challenges of immigrant mothers in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Parenting is arguably the most critical factor in protecting teenagers from problem behaviours, such as delinquency and substance use. For immigrant mothers, however, the ability to care for their children might be negatively affected by challenges related to acculturation and area deprivation. The aim of this study was to raise this issue by examining parenting challenges and needs among immigrant mothers of teenagers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. Such knowledge is crucial for society to be able to adequately support families in promoting their teenagers well-being. Based on an intersectional framework and qualitative interviews with 14 mothers, four themes related to challenges and needs emerged: structural challenges, cultural transition, psychosocial problems, and social support. The themes were highly intertwined and demonstrated substantial distress among immigrant mothers in relation to their parenting and protecting their children. Mothers' were, therefore, highly engaged in parenting and expressed a desire and motivation to improve their parenting through social support. The introduction of culturally sensitive parenting support specifically aimed at this marginalized group of parents is encouraged.

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Parenting; adolescence; immigration; parental support; qualitative

In March 2021, a young man was murdered in the middle of a residential area in Sweden. Imagine being the parent of a teenager when, suddenly, someone is shot right outside your window. How do you manage to be a supportive parent, facilitating your children's development and need for autonomy given those circumstances? Now, add to your imagination that you are being a mother of six, who is also trying to adapt to a foreign culture in a new country. Did the task get any easier?

While parenting a teenager may be hard for anyone, the experience of parenting is not universal. Empirical findings demonstrate that immigrant parents face additional challenges which may negatively affect their parenting. Post-immigration factors such as a

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lack of support (Heger Boyle & Ali, 2010), social isolation (Lewig et al., 2010), unemployment (Warfa et al., 2012) and changed family dynamics (Deng & Marlowe, 2013) are all common among immigrant parents. In addition, these parents are often exposed to psychosocial risks due to poor living conditions in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which in Sweden are characterized by low socio-economic status and widespread criminality (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). Such disadvantages may lead to diminished access to social institutions (Lee & Ousey, 2005), as well as weaker social ties (Webster et al., 2006), which in turn may affect parenting and parents' interaction with their children. Because mothers usually take on most responsibilities within immigrant families who have moved to Western societies (Pels, 2000), it is likely that immigrant mothers may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges.

Adolescence is typically characterized by psychological and emotional change when adolescents' are to establish their own identity separate from their parents (Kroger, 2007). Hence, many parents perceive this period as a challenging time in their parenting (Steinberg, 2001). For immigrant mothers who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, parenting adolescents is likely to be perceived as even more demanding due to additional factors involving acculturation (Berry, 2003) and area deprivation (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). However, studies addressing this multifaceted issue are limited. To date, only a few studies have examined parenting among immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (e.g. Callahan et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2005; Klebanov et al., 1994). Specifically, in-depth knowledge about the personal parenting experiences of these mothers is lacking. Considering the extensive research showing that parenting plays a significant role in adolescents' development (e.g. Koehn & Kerns, 2017; Steinberg, 2001), such information is imperative so that policy and practice can adequately support families in promoting their adolescents' psychosocial adjustment and well-being. Thus, against this background, and adopting an intersectional perspective, this study aims to contribute to the literature by examining challenges and needs among immigrant mothers of adolescents, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. The approach taken is to listen to the voices of these mothers themselves.

### ***Challenges to parenting in a new culture***

In recent decades, many people from developing countries in Asia and Africa, such as Syria and Somalia, have migrated to Sweden and several other Western countries (SCB, 2021). Although settling into a new culture may be difficult for anyone, these immigrant parents, and particularly the mothers, are often faced with several types of challenges that come with raising children (e.g. Deng & Marlowe, 2013). One such challenge relates to acculturation, defined as the cultural and psychological changes that stems from the meeting of two different cultures (Berry, 2003). As to parenting, leaving one's homeland to settle in a different country often implies a transition to new laws, parenting practices and family values which may contribute to feelings of confusion and distress (Filio et al., 2006). While immigrant parents in many cases struggle with learning a new language and have trouble accessing information about their rights and responsibilities in the new resident country (Osman et al., 2016), children often acculturate at a faster rate than their parents (Deng & Marlowe, 2013). Consequently, this may lead to intergenerational conflicts between children who endorse the

new culture and parents who adhere to their traditional cultural beliefs (Salami et al., 2017). Particularly parents who lack an occupation may be at risk of suffering from challenges related to intergenerational conflicts because spending one's days in the house tends to negatively affect the integration process (Leung, et al., 2019).

Due to language barriers and differences in cultural adaption, children may also serve as a link between their parents and society, resulting in role reversal and power conflicts (Osman et al., 2016). In addition to making parents feel powerless and thus unable to positively influence their children as a result of loss of parental self-efficacy (Jones & Prinz, 2005), such role changes may be disadvantageous to adolescents' development. For example, by threatening to contact the authorities, some children misuse their power to force their parents to give them, or let them do, what the children want. As a consequence, some parents who lack information about their rights in the resident country avoid setting boundaries for their children due to a fear of being reported to social services (Osman et al., 2016).

Empirical findings consistently show that adolescents benefit from authoritative parenting, which means that parents are warm and responsive to the child's emotional needs, while at the same time standing firm and being consistent in establishing and enforcing guidelines, limits, and appropriate expectations (Steinberg, 2001). When the balance of power between parents and children changes, with parents being scared to properly foster their children, the opportunity to establish and maintain such guidelines and limits may be diminished. As a consequence, children might fail to develop self-regulation and, thus, become impulsive or develop risk behaviours (Barber, 1996; Harris-McKoy & Cui, 2013).

Social support has been reported to work as a buffer against the negative effects of different strains on parenting (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Coyne & Downey, 1991). In particular, emotional and social support has been related to more authoritative parenting among mothers (Leinonen et al., 2003). For most people, the first source of social support is their own natural social network (e.g. family, relatives and friends) (Litwak et al., 1990). However, because leaving the home country typically implies a loss of their natural social network (i.e. extended family and relatives), many immigrant mothers lack support and, thus, feel lonely, isolated, and overwhelmed by sole parental responsibility in their new country (Salami et al., 2017). This may be especially relevant to single mothers who lack support from a spouse, and mothers who are unemployed and therefore have less opportunities to create their own social networks. For that reason, the support from social services in the resident country is critical in terms of mothers' well-being and parenting (Salami et al., 2017).

As a result of post-migration gender role changes, some immigrant parents also experience power conflicts between spouses (Osman et al., 2016). In many cultures with strong collectivistic values, women are typically expected to be solely responsible for the family and household, while men are responsible for the family's economic upkeep (Pels, 2000). Migration to an individualistic culture which emphasizes gender equality in childrearing might challenge that hierarchical power relationship, resulting in fathers feeling a loss of authority within the family (Renzaho et al., 2011). This may be positive in some respects, as mothers are given opportunities to establish a life outside the home. On the other hand, such a possibility could also include mothers taking on more responsibilities than fathers and, thus, carrying the burden of working

both in- and outside the home in the new country (Osman, 2017; Renzaho et al., 2011), which may have a negative effect on both their health and their parenting.

Above and beyond acculturation challenges, the experience of parenting among immigrant mothers may also be influenced by structural factors, such as unemployment (Warfa et al., 2012), low socio-economic status, and poor living conditions in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). The term 'disadvantaged neighborhoods' in a Swedish context refers to geographically delimited areas characterized by relatively low socio-economic status, where criminals have an impact on the local community (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). Public violence that risks harming third parties, parallel societal structures, an outspoken dissatisfaction with society, and open drug trafficking are all examples of factors that affect the daily life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Consequently, residents in such areas are exposed to risks, which in turn leads to insecurity, fear, and a reduced propensity to report crimes or participate in legal processes (The Swedish Police Authority, 2019). To date, 60 areas in Sweden are defined as deprived at different levels by the Swedish police. Almost three out of four inhabitants in all 60 areas have a foreign background (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019).

When raising adolescents in such disadvantaged neighbourhoods, given the unsafe environments and financial stress due to low socio-economic status, parents may often worry about their children's development, including exposure to risky environments and risk behaviours (Spijkers et al., 2012). Research indicates that parents with high levels of worry tend to use more control in their relationship with their adolescents (Wilson et al., 2011). Parental psychological control, defined as attempts to control children's behaviour through manipulative practices (e.g. guilt induction, criticism, and threatening to withdraw love) and overparenting is considered to be disadvantageous for the development of autonomy (Barber, 1996; Barber & Harmon, 2002; Schaefer, 1965), which in turn is a salient aspect of psychosocial development during adolescence. While parental psychological control undermines children's developmental need of autonomy by punishing feelings and behaviours that parents view as unacceptable (Barber et al., 2005), overparenting inhibits the development of autonomy by not allowing the child to make own decisions or to do things on his or her own (Thomasgard & Metz, 1997). Consequently, such parenting practices might restrict adolescents' social-emotional development (Barber, 1996), reduce psychosocial functioning (Carpenter et al., 2008; Fedele et al., 2011), and increase the risk for development of externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems (Barber et al., 1996; Hovee et al., 2009; McLeod et al., 2007).

For immigrant mothers to handle the challenges associated with migration and area deprivation, and thus be able to fulfil their children's needs, they may be in need of social support.

However, the supply of support aimed particularly at immigrant parents is limited, and the availability varies depending on where the parents live (Lundqvist, 2015). In 2018, the Swedish government highlighted the need to offer targeted forms of parental support, with special emphasis on culturally sensitive parental support (Official Reports of the Swedish Government, 2018). Existing parental support programmes are generally geared towards Western conditions rather than being sensitive to cultural and societal variations (Parra Cardona et al., 2012). Accordingly, immigrant parents use formal resources to a lesser degree than native-born parents (Hernández Plaza et al., 2005;

Kim et al., 2008). This situation risks contributing to inequality within the parenting group as some mothers have access to appropriate support while others do not.

Thus, there are strong reasons for providing culturally sensitive parental support. For such support to serve its purpose, however, it is necessary to identify what type of support immigrant mothers need so that policy makers and practitioners can help design the right type of support programmes (Gustafsson, 2020).

### ***Intersectionality***

One way of looking at the parenting experiences of immigrant mothers is through an intersectional lens. The core idea of intersectionality is that the effect of systems of power and social distinction, (e.g. race/ethnicity, social class, and gender), on human lives, cannot be fully understood in isolation from each other. Instead, systems of power intersect and overlap to result in inequalities and, thus, different social experiences (Hill Collins & Chepp, 2013). Consequently, scholars have used the concept of intersectionality to understand and explain experiences of groups holding multiple disadvantaged statuses (Cole, 2009).

Viruell-Fuentes et al. (2012) used this concept to gain a deeper understanding of immigrant health. Adopting an intersectional perspective, they argued that immigrant health cannot solely be understood in terms of cultural factors. Instead, a richer understanding of immigrant health requires a more in-depth analysis focusing on the intersection of acculturation and structural factors, (i.e. racism), as well as other social hierarchies, (i.e. race/ethnicity, class, and gender). A similar approach could be used to understand the parenting challenges experienced by immigrant parents.

An intersectional approach to parenting may help us obtain a better and more nuanced picture of the needs and challenges that immigrant parents are faced with above and beyond the mere process of acculturation. Regarding immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, their parenting experiences are likely to be shaped by an intersection of acculturation and neighbourhood disadvantages, resulting in experiences different from those of immigrant mothers living in more favourable areas. With that said, immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are not a homogeneous group, which is why within-group variability in the parenting experiences among these mothers is as likely to occur as between-group variability. An intersectional perspective emphasizes both the shared experiences and differences among group members (Cole, 2009).

Consider, for example, an immigrant mother living in a middle-class neighbourhood and an immigrant mother living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Despite the fact that they are both women and immigrant mothers, the latter is exposed to additional stressors and challenges to her parenting due to a poor, unsafe environment. Thus, they are unlikely to have the same parenting experience. The same line of reasoning could be used to understand the experiences of a well-educated immigrant mother and an unemployed immigrant mother, living in the same disadvantaged neighbourhood. Despite similar living conditions, the mothers hold different positions in the social system and, thus, will not share the same parenting experience. In both examples, acculturation intersects with structural factors and additional social distinctions, making the parenting experience different.

## Current study

This study was set in Sweden. For the past 150 years, Sweden has gone from being a country of emigration to being a country of immigration. In 2020, just over two million out of Sweden's 10 million inhabitants were foreign-born. Compared to traditional Swedish families, foreign families more often consist of single mothers (SCB, 2021), who are frequently suffering from social vulnerability in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Children in families suffering from social vulnerability are at greater risk of failing in school and engaging in criminal activities (Newcomb et al., 2002; Sariaslan et al., 2014), and their mothers have been identified as key to combating several of these social problems (Nilsson, 2017). However, according to our review of the literature, immigration poses several challenges, which may negatively affect mothers' possibilities to parent their children successfully. Based on intersectional theories (Hill Collins & Chepp, 2013) and empirical research (Spijkers et al., 2012), there is reason to believe that immigrant mothers raising adolescents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods face additional challenges beyond those experienced by immigrant mothers in general.

For society to be able to support this group of parents and thus their children, first-hand information about their challenges and needs is imperative, yet scarce. By understanding how immigrant mothers in disadvantaged neighbourhoods experience their parenting and what affects their parenting, policy makers and practitioners are better able to design adequate support to help mothers navigate parenting challenges and to fulfil their children's needs. Thus, to advance the field and to gain a deeper insight into the personal experiences of immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged areas, we used a qualitative research method, with the aim of answering the following research questions: [1] What challenges do immigrant mothers of adolescents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods face in their parenting? and [2] What need for parental support do immigrant mothers of adolescents who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods express?

## Method

The current study is the first part of a larger programme aimed at implementing and evaluating a culturally sensitive support programme for immigrant mothers with adolescents, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden (National Library of Medicine, NCT04440657).

## Participants

We applied a purposive sampling of immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. A total of 14 mothers participated in the study. We stopped recruitment of additional participant when nothing new seemed to appear in the data. The participants age range was 26–46 years ( $M_{age} = 42$ ). Time spent in Sweden ranged from 1 to 30 years ( $M_{years} = 19$ ). In terms of ethnic background, seven mothers were born in Somalia, three in Turkey, two in Syria, and one each in Morocco and Pakistan. Eight mothers were married or co-habiting and six were divorced and/or lived as single parents. Ten mothers had either a full or a part-time job. One mother was unemployed.

One mother was studying the Swedish language at a Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) programme provided by the municipality, and two mothers did not reveal their occupation. The number of children of the mothers ranged from two to eight ( $M = 4.5$ ). All mothers in the study had at least one teenage child.

### **Procedure**

To get in contact with the target group, we chose to involve in the recruitment experienced social workers, who on a daily basis work with family community services in deprived areas. We recruited participants with the help of social services in two mid-sized municipalities in Sweden. Both municipalities have identified disadvantaged neighbourhoods, characterized by low socio-economic status and widespread criminal activity (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). Social workers in the municipalities made initial contact with the mothers over the telephone and informed them orally about the study. If a mother showed an interest in participating in the study, a time and date for a personal interview were booked. We conducted the interviews from February to April 2021 at the Department of the Social Services in the municipalities. The second or third author conducted the interviews. We used the Swedish language during all interviews except during one that was conducted in English.

### **Interview**

We collected data using a semi-structured interview guide, which consisted of 18 questions regarding parenting and parenting support, including ‘What is your experience of being a parent in Sweden compared to being a parent in your home country?’, ‘What is hard about being a parent?’ and ‘Do you feel that you are in need of any parenting support?’. If necessary, we used follow-up questions to clarify an unclear answer (e.g. ‘What do you mean by that?’) or to obtain a richer description (e.g. ‘Can you give an example?’). We audio-recorded all interviews. The interviews lasted between 35 and 75 min.

### **Data analysis**

The first author transcribed verbatim all interviews. To familiarize ourselves with the material and gain a sense of content understanding, we started the analysis process by reading all the transcribed data several times. Using thematic analysis, we then analyzed all data inductively in accordance with the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis provides theoretical flexibility and is helpful in generating a deep understanding of the data. As suggested by Braun and Clarke, we started the analysis with a semantic coding process, reading all the data word for word, whereby sentences, paragraphs and words that captured or were related to the main concept were highlighted and coded. The codes were then listed and grouped based on their similarities and differences. We identified preliminary themes and clustered them under different subthemes. For example, ‘insecurity’ was combined with ‘fear of children adapting deviant behavior’ and ‘fear of letting children go outside’, resulting in one of the subthemes: ‘the dilemma of protecting from danger vs. supporting independence’. In the

next step, the initial subthemes were merged and arranged into overarching themes that encapsulated the core of the subthemes. As a final step, all themes were reviewed and compared to the initial codes. To ensure the findings' credibility and confirmability, all authors discussed the findings and made sure that they had reached a consensus during every step in the analysis.

Extracts from the participants' responses were chosen to illustrate the themes and were translated from Swedish to English by the first author. To facilitate reading, some grammatical errors arising from language difficulties were corrected when translated. However, these changes did not affect the content of the extracts.

### **Ethical considerations**

We provided information about the purpose of the study, data confidentiality, and how the information obtained in the interview may be used to all participants both orally and written prior to the interview. Information letters were written in English, Swedish, Arabic, and Somali. Further, we ensured before the interviews started that participation was voluntary and that the decision whether to answer or not answer any questions was theirs alone. The interviewers solicited written informed consent from all participants. We informed participants about the possibility of contacting the researchers or their local social service centre if they had any concerns or questions after the interview. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (no 2020-04510;201013). As some of the participants had limited Swedish language skills, we put extra emphasis on making sure that everyone had reached a full understanding before the interviews started. Also, since the recruitment of participants was done with the help of social workers, we made sure that all participants understood that the information obtained in the interview would not be shared with or influence future contacts with social services.

## **Results**

When analyzing the data, we identified four overarching themes regarding the parenting challenges and need for support among immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (i.e. in relation to the two research questions): (1) Structural challenges (2) Cultural transition (3) Psychosocial problems, and (4) Social support. We broke down each theme into two or three subthemes, respectively (see [Table 1](#)).

### **Structural challenges**

The participants talked about several structural challenges arising from complex problems in adjusting to Swedish society, such as unsafe living conditions and difficulty obtaining a permanent job. This resulted in two different subthemes: *The dilemma of protecting from danger vs. supporting independence* and *financial stress*.

*The dilemma of protecting from danger vs. supporting independence.* Almost all participants mentioned the challenge in raising children in an area characterized by a high crime rate. The parents expressed a fear regarding the normalization of deviant behaviour in the area and were worried that their own children would adapt to the destructive

**Table 1.** Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Structural challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The dilemma of protecting from danger vs. supporting independence</li> <li>• Financial stress</li> </ul>
Cultural transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding and trusting the social system</li> <li>• Intrafamilial acculturation gap</li> <li>• From collectivistic to individualistic parenting</li> </ul>
Psychosocial problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggling with self as a parent in the new country</li> <li>• Difficulties in relation to parenting practice</li> </ul>
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressed need of parental education, counselling and activities</li> <li>• Defining culturally sensitive parental support</li> </ul>

environment and develop risk behaviours. Raising adolescents in these areas seemed particularly difficult, as described by one mother: *And just that period when children are 14 ... up to 18 years old. You do not know where they end up. That's just ... my son is just at that critical age.*

Some parents mentioned that previous occurrences, such as recent shootings in the neighbourhood, had made them afraid to let their children go outside. Thoughts about potential scenarios and fear about whether or not the children would ever come back home again, resulted in an inability for parents to relax which, at times, made the children distressed as well. To manage the fear, some parents described always picking up their children from school, as well as dropping them off, instead of letting them walk or take the bus by themselves. Wanting to keep the children at home made some parents suffer inner conflicts when trying to balance their own inner fear and the children's well-being and autonomy. The struggle with wanting to keep children indoor due to fear seemed to increase as the children became older.

We pick all our children up from school because I'm too scared to let them come home by themselves. Sometimes the 13-year-old, she wants to come by bus with her friends. I count the minutes until she's home. I'm thinking, will she come home or not? When is she coming home? I'm so scared right now. Because so much is happening here in [name of the area] now and ... on the way home from school, you never know what might happen. That's why I'm a little scared now. On the other hand, I want my children ... I want them to stand on their own two feet, I want them to go out on their own and be independent. I want them to be a little free. But because so much is happening here in [name of the area] ... I actually worry about them now. Because of that, I pick them up and drop them off a lot. (Respondent 5)

*Financial stress.* The employment rate of the parents varied, with some mothers working full-time and some not working at all. Despite different employment rates, most participants talked about financial struggles as one of the challenges of being a parent in Sweden. They described lack of education and low-paying jobs, as well as traditional gender roles as the main reasons for not being able to get a steady income. Some parents described constantly having a bad conscience, because the lack of money made them unable to give their children what they wanted and needed. In particular, the negative emotions seemed to emerge when the participants compared their own family situation with the opportunities available to children born and raised in traditional Swedish families.

Further, the financial struggles seemed to increase the parents' worries about their children's future, as well as to build up a fear that their children would get involved in criminal activities as a way of obtaining some extra money. Indeed, some of the participants described the high crime rate in the areas as a result of young people seeing criminality as the only option for coming by money.

Many mothers are unemployed. The money does not exist. When your son says to you "I want some money to go to a burger restaurant", how could you give him that money? What if you have six children ... it hurts. You don't have the money. You should not just cook for them and wash their clothes and so on, they also want to have ... they want to have some extra money in their pocket. Otherwise they will find the money somewhere else. (Respondent 1)

### **Cultural transition**

The parents described the transition from their culture of origin to a new and foreign culture as challenging in several ways. The challenges included cultural adaption, lack of integration, language barriers, racial discrimination, and homesickness. The overarching theme *cultural transition* included three subthemes regarding parental challenges due to cultural transition: *understanding and trusting the social system*, *intrafamilial acculturation gap*, and *from collectivistic to individualistic parenting*.

*Understanding and trusting the social system.* The cultural transition did not only imply adaption to a new culture in general, but also adaption to new parenting practices, as well as new parenting rights and obligations in particular. Several participants stressed the importance of gaining information and knowledge about Swedish society to be able to manage the role as a parent.

If I am to speak for myself ... being an immigrant mother in Swedish society, support is needed. In order to ... be able to enter Swedish society, to understand how it works and then be able to take care of my children as well as possible. (Respondent 10)

Mothers who felt they had received sufficient information and opportunities to adapt to the new culture, seemed to experience fewer parenting challenges than mothers who felt they lacked appropriate information and knowledge about Swedish society. However, the degree of integration seemed to depend on the parent's own ability and willingness to search for information, resulting in differences in parenting ability and well-being within the particular parenting group.

Furthermore, lack of information about the social system and parents' rights in Sweden caused several mothers to express a fear of social services. Almost all parents talked about how they thought that they would be separated from their children by social services if they were not good enough parents. Consequently, the mothers were afraid to trust their own instincts as parents, resulting in a feeling of loss of autonomy in their parenthood. Some mothers compared raising children in Sweden to raising children in constant fear and described how that fear made them avoid setting boundaries for their children, as well as seeking help if needed. However, the fear seemed to diminish as the mothers' knowledge of Swedish culture and the social system increased, which emphasizes the importance of mothers receiving correct information.

We don't dare to say anything to our children, we sometimes don't dare to set limits. You are afraid all the time. And when you build this family you build your children's environment, you build their power, you build ... lots of good services. But if you're scared, it will just be chaos. (Respondent 1)

But here, you should raise your children with a little fear, because ... you hear from the media, from people, from here and there "they take the child", "be careful", eh ... "don't do like that". You have no ... you have no freedom. All the time you try to ask which parenting method you should use, you do not use your own methods. You try ... what should I do? If I tell my son, for example, "take out the garbage" or "make your bed". Do I have the right to say that? It's a fear of the authorities. (Respondent 1)

*Intrafamilial acculturation gap.* Several participants said that their children adapted to the new culture at a faster rate than they did themselves, resulting in an intrafamilial acculturation gap. While parents lacked information about Swedish society, children learned about their rights from schoolteachers and friends. However, the information was sometimes misunderstood or misused; for instance, youngsters can get the idea that parents are not allowed to say no to their children in Sweden. Some children chose to take advantage of their parents' lack of information about Swedish society and threatened to contact the authorities if the parents set boundaries or did not give them what they wanted.

You live with your children in Sweden who function in a way, which is very different from where you come from, so ... parents want to keep their culture. And children almost get into fights with their parents for not agreeing with their mom who wants to keep the parenting structures that she had at home before she moved here. And then comes different information to the children, a different picture from teachers, from the community out there, resulting in "you're mean, you don't give me what I want, I'll report you to the social services", things like that. Then parents are powerless. (Respondent 10)

Children do not have respect for us. And everyone, all parents, we cannot say that parents don't love their children, it is not possible, but sometimes when they tell their children that it is forbidden to, for instance, use the iPad for more than 2 h, the children say "we will tell social services that you beat me". (Respondent 12)

A few mothers described that their teenage children in fact had contacted the police due to disagreements. However, the children's use of power against their parents seemed to decrease as the parents' knowledge about their own rights increased.

*From collectivistic to individualistic parenting.* A recurring challenge reported by almost all parents was the transition from a collectivistic culture to an individualistic culture, which meant a loss of a natural social support system. The participants described being a parent in the countries of origin as a collective task, where the responsibility for the children was shared with family members, relatives and neighbours. That stands in contrast to being a parent in Sweden, which participants described as hard and lonely due to suddenly having sole responsibility. Mothers who lacked an occupation or who lived as single parents seemed especially affected by having sole responsibility. One mother described the difference between being a parent in Sweden and being a parent in Somalia as follows:

The difference is, as I have said ... that here, you are the parent. Here in Sweden ... it is you, you must take your own responsibility. It is just you! But there in Somalia, all the responsibility you share it with your family and relatives. (Respondent 2)

The transition from a collectivistic to an individualistic culture seemed to affect mothers greatly, as they were the ones being most responsible for the family. One mother described the move to Sweden as suddenly having to take on the role of a father, grandmother and aunt, while also being a mother: *And here ... as ... I was alone, myself I have to be ... sometimes dad, become a mother, become an aunt and talk and so on. Different roles.*

## Psychosocial problems

Some participants stressed that there are several psychosocial challenges that come with being an immigrant mother raising children in a foreign country, such as a loss of self-esteem, insecurity and a lack of respect from the children. To cover these psychosocial issues, we divided the overarching theme into two subthemes: *struggling with oneself as a parent in the new country* and *difficulties in relation to parenting practice*.

*Struggling with oneself as a parent in the new country.* Mothers described being a parent in a new country as challenging to the self-image, as the transition to a new culture also implied a transition to a new identity. Some mothers expressed a sadness when comparing themselves with the mother they used to be, as they felt like they had lost their self-esteem, self-confidence and strength in the new environment. One mother explained that the loss of self-confidence and independency negatively affected her parenting: *In the home country, you are worthy and you have your, you have your self-confidence, independent woman actually. And that ... here in Sweden ... there are various worries ... you sometimes lose ... the parenthood.*

Moreover, several parents mentioned that their insecurities and loss of support from relatives made them rely on their children, which contributed to an increased sense of powerlessness and lack of self-esteem. Also, some mothers highlighted psychological problems as the result of parenting challenges, including distress, mood swings, sadness, trouble sleeping and a high degree of worry. The participants expressed an awareness that their children could be negatively affected by their mothers' psychological stress, as exemplified by one mother:

Sometimes when it is too much, you get stressed. You notice immediately if you influence the children so they also become stressed. So, you should calm down, I would want to be ... be a little calmer. (Respondent 6)

*Difficulties in relation to parenting practice.* A recurrent topic that arose when participants talked about the challenges of being a parent was disobedience. Several mothers mentioned that it was a struggle to keep the children on track, and that they felt like their children were lacking respect for them as a parent. Respecting adults was something that several mothers mentioned as one of the most important things to teach their children, but despite their efforts, children often chose to ignore their parents' rules and exhortations. Having a child with behaviour problems was described as a challenge affecting the whole family since it implied a loss of time and energy for other things, as well as psychological consequences such as worries, stress and sadness.

... Children's problems also become parents' problems because they are connected. If my child suffers, I suffer too. And it becomes difficult to focus on everything else. Eh ... that's the hardest part for a parent. (Respondent 10)

## Social support

The theme *social support* is related to the second research question regarding parental support. The overarching theme includes two subthemes: *expressed need of parental education, counselling and activities* and *defining culturally sensitive parental support*.

*Expressed need of parental education, counselling, and activities.* As a result of the parenting challenges, several participants expressed a need for parental support. One mother said:

But when you are a parent, and have children in Sweden ... you always need help. Different role, doesn't matter what activity or what help I need, but as long as ... to get a little ... get some course or parenting activity.

Due to the loss of support from extended family and relatives, many parents felt abandoned in their parenthood and expressed a need for appropriate guidance and counselling. Parenting activities and support groups for parents with similar backgrounds were also suggested, as that was expected to lead to new contacts and someone with whom they could share knowledge as well as experiences. Furthermore, the mothers distinctly expressed a need for general courses with the aim of improving parenting skills, as well as more targeted support programmes, such as parenting courses focusing on parent-child communication and conflict-management.

I usually ... look for ... somewhere where I can learn ... how I should communicate, or how I could connect with the kids, with other people, with myself as well. Sometimes I take several courses that are [...] and learning at home. To get a little extra ... experience. (Respondent 2)

I'm thinking ... parents as in ... parents to adolescents. They would need to get someone to talk to. If I'm having a hard, hard, hard time, I don't know who I should go to and explain "I'm experiencing this, what should I do?" Things like that. To get advice, what you should do. Somewhere you can go and ask. It is actually needed. (Respondent 7)

*Defining culturally sensitive parental support.* In order to reach out to immigrant parents, participants stressed the importance of offering culturally sensitive support programmes with which they are able to identify. One mother described her experience of attending parenting support programmes in Sweden like this: *Eh, I went to several courses where I don't recognize myself. In this course, it is not me.*, and stressed the importance of listening to and identifying the unique needs of the particular families. The following quote from Respondent 1 exemplifies the wish for culturally adapted parental support:

What is important to me is that this education will not always be about someone, eh, for example Swedish family. We want education for us with many children, with different cultures, eh ... with different conflicts. It is not just Olle and Maria, they have one child or two. We have six, four, large family. We have lots of different ... we have different feelings. We are not similar. We are different. 100%. But we try to strike a balance with society. We are different. Our needs, it is another matter. (Respondent 1)

Furthermore, many parents are afraid that they are going to be judged and, at worst, be separated from their children if they open up about their problems. For this reason, participants emphasized that in order for them to seek help, a deeper understanding of their situation and a non-judgmental approach is required. The mothers need to

feel safe enough to trust the person or persons delivering the support, and they highlighted the importance of being treated with respect and humanity.

## Discussion

Being a parent to adolescents might be challenging to anyone because of the physical, cognitive, and individual changes that comes with the teenage years (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). For immigrants, however, this period of parenthood is likely to be affected by additional challenges involving acculturation (Berry, 2003) and structural problems (Erfelt & Abdirahman, 2019). In this study, we aimed to gain insight into the parenting experiences of immigrant mothers of adolescents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. Specifically, using a qualitative research method, we examined what challenges these mothers face in their parenting, and what needs for parental support they express. Such knowledge is currently lacking and is crucial for society to be able adequately to support families in promoting their adolescents' positive development. By giving a voice to this marginalized group, our study expands the parenting literature, in which there has been an overrepresentation of studies addressing parenting among Western families over the years (Smetana, 2017).

### *Challenges to parenting*

As a first step in this study, we examined what challenges immigrant mothers of adolescents who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden experience in their parenting. The particular challenges could be divided into three specific domains: cultural transition, structural challenges, and psychosocial problems. However, in support of intersectional theories (Hill Collins & Chepp, 2013), these domains were highly intertwined and appear to be working together to shape the individual experiences of post-migration parenting in Sweden.

This study's findings concur with a substantial literature showing that immigrant parents' experience of parenting is highly influenced by acculturation processes (e.g. Berry, 2003; Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Filio et al., 2006). Among the challenges mentioned by the mothers in the current study were intergenerational conflicts, language barriers, and lack of integration as obstacles to successful parenting. Further, although many mothers had moved to Sweden as children or teenagers and thus lacked their own experience of being a parent in their country of origin, they tended to compare the collectivistic values of their home country to Sweden's more individualistic society. Consequently, being a parent in Sweden was perceived as challenging due to lack of support from extended family members, many responsibilities, a heavy workload, and loneliness. According to the hypothesis about intergenerational transmission of parenting, parents tend to parent in a way similar to that which they themselves experienced while growing up (Serbin & Karp, 2003). This may be an explanation as to why participants in this study often compared their current parenting situation to the one prevailing in their country of origin, despite a lack of parental experiences in their home country. In addition, due to lack of social support and networks in Sweden, mothers typically turned to family members in their home country when they were in need of parental advice or support. In this way, parenting values that differ from those in their country of residence

can be maintained and thus risk affecting the experience of parenting in the new environment.

The challenge of migrating from a collectivistic to an individualistic culture has been raised in previous studies (e.g. Heger Boyle & Ali, 2010; Osman et al., 2016), including Lewig et al. (2010) who demonstrated that the absence of extended family members puts additional strains on parents adjusting to new cultures. Although most mothers in this study said that the loss of extended support networks made parenting a demanding task, mothers who lacked an occupation or who lived as single parents seemed to be particularly affected by having the sole responsibility. The former because unemployment was associated with exposure to fewer social contexts and, thus, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and the latter because being a single parent involved the experience of having to take on twice as much responsibility as co-habiting parents.

Further, in line with previous studies (e.g. Renzaho et al., 2011), mothers expressed a fear of being separated from their children by social services. Some participants described the feeling that their children sometimes used their mothers' fear by threatening to contact the authorities as a way to increase their power and get their way. Consequently, mothers felt powerless, which sometimes led to an avoidance of setting boundaries for their children. Lack of boundaries, guidelines, and appropriate expectations have been linked to an increased risk for risk behaviours in adolescence (Harris-McKoy & Cui, 2013). One explanation for this could be that parenting without firm boundaries may create contexts that put adolescents at risk for deviant behaviours. Research (Kiesner et al., 2010) has found that permissive or uninvolved parenting predicts youth involvement with deviant peers which, in turn, predicts a youth's delinquent behaviour. Given that the mothers in the current study lived in neighbourhoods with relatively high crime rates, it is likely that their children are surrounded by delinquent peers to a greater extent than young people living in other neighbourhoods. Thus, they may be at even greater risk for developing antisocial behaviours in the absence of firm and appropriate parenting.

Mothers' fear of social services and, thus, their avoidance of setting boundaries for their children, was explained by the participants as a result of lacking information about the social systems and parenting laws in Sweden. Mothers who felt they had received sufficient information expressed fewer parenting obstacles in general, which indicates that receiving correct information about social norms, laws, and cultural differences when migrating to a new country might work as buffer against negative parenting experiences. According to some mothers, however, the degree of social integration was perceived as dependent on parents' own opportunities and willingness to search for information themselves. As a consequence, this may contribute to inequalities and in-group variabilities in parenting since the ability and motivation to seek information might vary among mothers.

An important finding in this study was that several mothers expressed feeling worried about their children's future and safety due to financial stress and criminogenic environments. In Sweden, every family has the right to financial support for their children, including immigrants (SFS, 1947:529). Despite this, mothers in this study experienced financial stress, a feeling which increased when they compared themselves to traditional Swedish families. A relative lack of money was perceived as synonymous to lacking opportunities to meet the needs of their children. This perceived lack of financial

resources made some mothers fear that their children would get involved in criminal activities as a way of obtaining money. Moreover, unsafe environments and high rates of criminal activity in the neighbourhoods were perceived as obstacles that prevented mothers from promoting their children's autonomy. Previous research (Wilson et al., 2011) has indicated that parents with high levels of worry tend to use more control in their relationship with their adolescents. In line with such findings, mothers in this study explained that worrying about their children's safety had contributed to changes in their parenting practices. For example, some mothers explained that they chose to drive their children to school or leisure activities instead of letting them walk or take the bus by themselves. Other mothers said that they called their children by phone multiple times when they were away from home, just to ensure that they were safe. These modified parenting behaviours not only affected mothers' own psychological well-being, but might also negatively affect adolescents' development. In particular, overparenting might affect children's autonomy, which in turn could lead to externalizing problems and reduced psychosocial functioning (Carpenter et al., 2008; Fedele et al., 2011).

The participants described substantial distress related to their role as mothers. The, at times, intense parenting situation in combination with mothers' own acculturation process had also contributed to psychological health problems for the participants in this study, including mothers experiencing distress, mood swings, sadness, and trouble sleeping. Mothers who used to perceive themselves as strong and independent in their home country experienced a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence in the new country. These negative feelings seemed to increase when mothers felt a need to rely on their children, who were often more socially and culturally integrated compared to their parents. Lack of self-esteem and self-confidence in parenting, as well as mothers' experiences of powerlessness, might be associated with loss of parental self-efficacy, defined as parents' belief in their ability to positively influence their children's behaviour and development (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001). Parental self-efficacy has been linked to positive and promotive parenting practices which in turn have been linked to a positive adjustment in children (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Jones & Prinz, 2005). Especially relevant to our group of interest, scholars have argued that parental self-efficacy might work as a protective factor for families living in difficult environments (Ardelt & Eccles, 2001; Jones & Prinz, 2005). In contrast, low parental self-efficacy tends to be associated with less positive parenting practices and, thus, less positive psychosocial development in children (Jones & Prinz, 2005).

In sum, in relation to Research Question 1 about what challenges immigrant mothers of adolescents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods face in their parenting, our findings indicate that acculturation processes, structural challenges, and psychosocial issues, all work together to shape the experience of post-migration parenting among immigrant mothers.

### **Social support**

Social support might work as a buffer against negative parenting behaviours (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Coyne & Downey, 1991). Therefore, as a second step in this study, we examined the expressed need for parental support among immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. In particular, mothers requested structured

parental support programmes aimed at promoting parenting abilities and strengthening the parent–child relationship as well as informal gatherings aimed at meeting and sharing experiences with other parents. Moreover, because migration typically involved limited access to family and relatives, mothers’ stressed the need of having somewhere to turn to for parenting guidance and counselling on demand.

These findings are valuable for several reasons.

First, studies examining the need for support among immigrant parents primarily pay attention to formal resources, such as structured parental support programmes offered by the authorities or social institutions (e.g. Hamari et al., 2021; Osman et al., 2016). While such formal support has resulted in positive outcomes (e.g. Osman et al., 2017), the first source of help and support for most people is their own informal social network (e.g. Litwak et al., 1990). For immigrants and ethnic minorities, informal social support might be particularly relevant, as they typically have limited access to social institutions (Lee & Ousey, 2005). However, many immigrants lack a social network in the resident country (e.g. Heger Boyle & Ali, 2010). In this study, most participants stressed that they had lost their natural social support system as a result of migration. Consequently, they felt overwhelmed at having suddenly been given sole responsibility in the new country and expressed limited access to everyday parental advice and people to share knowledge and experiences with. In that sense and given the relatively low level of use of formal resources among immigrants (Hernández Plaza et al., 2005), we argue that the importance of informal social support should not be underestimated in the case of immigrant parents. Such a line of reasoning has been used in previous studies as well. Hernández Plaza et al. (2005) developed and examined a needs assessment model that emphasized the importance of both formal and informal social support systems in relation to need satisfaction. They concluded that it is insufficient only to pay attention to formal resources. In particular, they argued that an integration of informal and formal social support is especially important in the case of immigrants. For immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, access to both informal and formal social resources might be crucial, given that area deprivation typically contributes to both diminished access to social institutions (Lee & Ousey, 2005), and fewer social bonds (Webster et al., 2006).

In terms of formal parental support, both this and previous studies (e.g. Osman et al., 2016), have identified an expressed need for structured parental support among immigrant parents. Despite this, empirical findings demonstrate that immigrant parents have lower participation rates and improve parenting practices less than native-born parents when offered parental support programmes (Kim et al., 2008). Participants in this study, as well as in previous research (Osman et al., 2016; Renzaho et al., 2011), expressed that their fear of authorities and social services decreased their propensity to seek parental support, which may explain the low participation rates in parental support programmes. Mothers stressed that for them to open up about their problems, they needed to feel secure in the knowledge that they would be met with cultural sensitivity and a non-judgmental approach. Another plausible explanation for low participation rates in support programmes and less improvement in parenting skills among immigrants may be that parental support programmes are typically geared towards Western conditions, disregarding the unique needs of families with a different background (Parra Cardona et al., 2012). This suggestion is supported by the results of our

study, as mothers highlighted the importance of being offered culturally sensitive support programmes with which they were able to identify. For example, one mother explained that she couldn't identify with examples and exercises used in regular parental support programmes since they were generally based on Swedish standards and failed to take into account cultural differences. Consequently, she felt that the support offered didn't serve its purpose.

The need to offer culturally sensitive parental support has been voiced by the Swedish government as well (SOU, 2018). Nonetheless, only one support programme aimed at meeting the needs of immigrant parents has been systematically implemented and evaluated in Sweden (Osman, 2017). However, that programme is aimed only at Somali-speaking parents, which means that there is still a gap in parental support aimed at parents of various ethnic origins. Thus, the current study is an important contribution to the field as it extends current knowledge by providing valuable information about challenges and needs among immigrant mothers of various ethnic origins living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden. Such knowledge is imperative in the work of developing culturally sensitive parenting support programmes, since emphasis should be placed on forming practices with the goal of supporting parents' self-confidence and empowerment, and doing this on parents' own terms, not on a description of parents' needs formulated by the authorities (Gustafsson, 2020).

Thus, in relation to Research Question 2 about mothers' need for parental support, this study identified an expressed need for both informal and formal parental support among immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden.

### ***Study limitations and strengths***

The results of the study should be interpreted with consideration of the study's limitations. First, this study was conducted using a small purposive sampling. It needs to be conducted that such a sampling strategy potentially limits the generalizability of the results. Hence, as a way of dealing with this issue, we took into account that immigrants are not a homogeneous group and included mothers of various ethnic origins. This might be considered a strength of the study as our results are not dependent on or isolated to a specific ethnic group. Furthermore, recruitment of participants was done with the help of social workers who exercise authority. Due to power relations, this may have affected what the participants chose to share during the interviews and, thus, the study results. We prevented this risk by putting extra emphasis on ensuring that all participants fully understood that their stories would not be shared with social workers or influence their future contacts with social services. Finally, it is important to note that we examined the challenges and needs among immigrant mothers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in a Swedish context. What is classified as a disadvantaged neighbourhood may differ between countries, which should be taken into consideration when generalizing findings across borders.

Despite these limitations an important strength of the study is the emphasis on the voice of immigrant mothers and their parenting challenges, experiences and needs in a new country of residence. Giving attention to immigrant mothers' parenting addresses an empirical as well as practical gap in the knowledge available through parenting

literature, where focus has largely been on Western families and their parenting experiences (Smetana, 2017).

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

The results of this study provide important insight into how policy and practice should support immigrant mothers in promoting their children's positive development. First, it is important to ensure that immigrant families receive information about their rights and obligations as parents upon arrival to the country where they will reside. By ensuring that parents are well aware of parenting laws, practices, and social systems in the new country, parents might be less likely to be affected by future challenges, such as fear of social services and powerlessness.

Second, we recommend that authorities and institutions incorporate culturally sensitive parental support programmes aimed at strengthening immigrant mothers in their parenting role. Such programmes can advantageously focus on empowerment, identity and self-confidence, parent–child communication, and parental stress and worry. Due to the fact that participants in this study lived in disadvantaged neighbourhoods characterized by high crime rates, they might well benefit from increased knowledge about risks and protective factors in adolescence. To increase immigrant mothers' propensity to seek parental support, and for the support to serve its purpose, it is of great importance for practitioners to respect cultural differences and adjust the support offered to the target groups. Examples or exercises used should be customized to meet the unique situations of the participants, and group leaders should be experienced and culturally educated.

### **Conclusion**

This study makes an important contribution to the literature and identifies several factors of importance for policy and practice by giving a marginalized group a voice in Swedish society – immigrant mothers of teenagers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The findings demonstrate substantial distress among immigrant mothers in relation to their parenting skills and their desire to protect their children. This study identified four overarching themes related to the groups' parenting challenges and needs – structural challenges, cultural transition, psychosocial problems, and social support. In line with intersectional theories (Hill Collins & Chepp, 2013), all themes were highly intertwined and appeared to be working together to shape individual parenting experiences. Despite several obstacles to successful parenting and feeling confident as a parent, mothers were highly engaged in parenting and expressed a motivation and desire to improve their parenting skills through social support. The Swedish authorities should encourage this through introduction of culturally sensitive parental support programmes, as well as informal gatherings with the aim of increasing mothers' opportunities to create their own informal social networks.

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