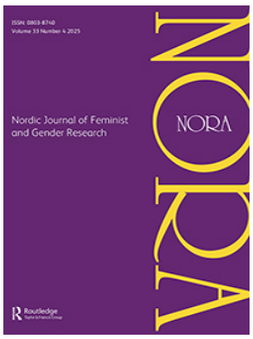

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"I Don't Feel Like It's Extra Work": Gender, Parenting and Everyday Sustainability Labour

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ABSTRACT

In this article we enlist the feminist lens of the everyday to theorise the way parenting and environmental sustainability intersect in the lives of parents committed to combating climate change. Based on interviews with 27 parents from 20 families in Iceland, we interrogate whether and how gender fractures parental sustainability labour - the work that goes into making family lives environmentally sustainable - in a country which is often described as the most gender equal in the world. While extant research is largely disjointed, our data reveals that everyday sustainability labour is undertaken disproportionately by mothers and that it encompasses overlapping yet distinct physical, cognitive, emotional and pedagogical dimensions. However, mothers reconciled their commitment to gender equality with their lived experiences of gendered division of sustainability labour by re-framing the latter as preference, hobby or enjoyable activity. We situate these gendered narratives of parental sustainability labour within broader discourses of neoliberal climate governance that seeks to shifts the responsibility of climate action to individual households and intensive parenting ideologies that individualises child-rearing, prompting parents to make informed choices for their children's future. We conclude by reflecting on how gendered politics of child-rearing and neoliberal climate governance are shaping each other.

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Introduction

Concerns about the environment in general and the climate crisis in particular are increasingly becoming central to parenting practices. Parents today are engaging with these issues in the context of neoliberal climate governance, which seeks to shift the responsibility for combating climate change from states and corporations to households making informed "green" choices (Bee et al., 2015; Sandilands, 1993). Consequently, a growing body of literature has drawn attention to the way climate concerns are driving some parents to pursue environmentally sustainable practices (Alisat et al., 2014; Barnett et al., 2019; Ritch & Brownlie, 2016; Shiel et al., 2020; Urien & Kilbourne, 2011) which aim to meet "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future

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generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: np). Therefore, as a concept, sustainability ties together the question of human impact on the natural environment and issues of intergenerational equity (Guest, 2010). Relatedly, another set of studies have documented the effort that goes into making family lives environmentally sustainable and pointed to gendered inequities within mixed-gender households wherein women are more likely to initiate sustainability practices, weave them into family life and shoulder most of the tasks involved (de Wilde & Parry, 2022; Organo et al, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2024; Oates & McDonald, 2006). This article bridges extant research on parental engagement with environmental issues on one hand and that on gendered sustainability practices on the other to critically unpack the gendered parental labour that makes possible and sustains environmentally sustainable living within families. By everyday sustainability labour we refer to the range of work—both visible and invisible—that is carried out by people in their daily lives to minimise environmental degradation and achieve environmental sustainability, underpinned by a commitment to combating the climate crisis. Despite growing interest in the association between parenthood and sustainability, till date no systematic studies have analysed parents' everyday sustainability labour in Iceland. As a Nordic welfare state, Iceland is a particularly generative site to study the intersections of gender, parenthood and sustainable labour. This is because the dual-earner carer model of family life is enshrined in Iceland's social policy wherein fathers are seen as equally responsible for childrearing in a country that has ranked first in the global gender equity index for fifteen years in a row (World Economic Forum, 2024), and prides itself in being at the forefront of sustainable living as understood by the government's performance dashboard for sustainable development goals (Heimsmarkmiðin um sjálfbæra þróun, n.d.).

With a focus on contemporary Iceland, in this article we enlist the feminist lens of everyday practices and household labour to unpack the forms that everyday sustainability labour assumes within families and investigate whether and how gender inequities exist in this regard. We further explore how any potential gendered inequalities vis-à-vis everyday sustainability labour are understood and explained by parents, especially mothers, in Iceland, since an "aura of gender equality" (Pétursdóttir, 2012) pervades the country's self-image and everyday discourses. We do so by drawing on our qualitative study with 27 parents from across 20 families living in or around the Reykjavík capital area of Iceland.

The article has five main sections. First, we critically review existing research on parental engagement with environmental sustainability and the labour that underpins such engagement. Then we set out the context of gender politics, parenting and sustainability labour in Iceland to illuminate gaps in our current understandings. Next, we introduce our project on environmental sustainability and parenting in contemporary Iceland, outlining our research methods and providing an overview of our participants. Then, we expand on the key insights from our data about the quadripartite structure of sustainability labour undertaken by parents—especially mothers—which encompasses physical, cognitive, emotional and pedagogical elements as well as the way parents reconcile this unequal gendered sustainability labour with their commitment to gender equality. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on what these narratives reveal about the relation between gendered politics of child-rearing and neoliberal climate governance in Iceland and beyond.

Parenting and Environmental Sustainability Labour

A growing body of research has documented how environmental concerns are being cited by many as one of the reasons to be either child-free or to have fewer children (Clark, 2024; Nakkerud, 2024). Alongside studies about "environmentally childfree" adults, scholars have drawn attention to the way those who decide to become parents and are committed to environmental sustainability think about their impact on the environment vis-à-vis family life, child-rearing and consumption practices. Becoming a parent has often been described as a "life-changing" or "transformative" experience that prompts people to reflect on their own identities and behaviours (Milfont et al., 2020). Specifically, researchers have found that parents exhibit greater legacy motivation as well as concerns for future generations (Ekholm, 2020; Milfont et al., 2020; Shrum, 2021). Concern for the future or "generativity" (Erikson, 1950) in the face of the climate crisis has been termed "environmental generativity" (Milfont & Sibley, 2011). Indeed, studies have found that parents who have a higher "generativity" tend to pursue environmentally sustainable consumption practices and espouse commitments to tackling climate change (Milfont et al., 2012; Ritch & Brownlie, 2016). Although "environmental generativity" is not exhibited exclusively by those who have children, such tendencies assume greater immediacy among parents who perceive a direct connection to the future through their children (Milfont & Sibley, 2011; Milfont et al., 2012). Moreover, parents' current engagements with environmental issues are often mediated through pre-existing environmental attitudes (prior to becoming parents) and the limits parenthood places on their time, money and energy (Shrum et al., 2023).

Another set of studies has illuminated the interface between environmental sustainability and domestic labour without necessarily linking it to parenting. Studies in this vein have drawn attention to household-level sustainability labour as a function of "environmental privatisation" (Sandilands, 1993) whereby the responsibility for tackling climate change and ensuring environmental sustainability is shifted from states to households and individuals. At the level of the household, sustainable practices relate to the purchase of products that declare respect for the environment and workers' rights, waste reduction, re-using and recycling goods to lengthen their lifespan, among other environmentally responsible behaviours (Ritch & Brownlie, 2016). Indeed, within the circular economy, consumers are part of the wider division of labour as they undertake "consumption work" necessary for "the purchase, use, re-use and disposal of consumption goods and services" (Wheeler & Glucksmann, 2015, p. 37). In parents' everyday lives, sustainability labour is enacted at the broader intersection of environmental generativity, child-rearing practices, consumption work and household responsibilities. Extant research is largely disjointed and does not always pull these different threads together to understand parenting and sustainability labour within a joint framework, which we set out to do in this article.

Some argue that getting households to adopt sustainable behaviour is a cost-effective solution for governments, a so-called "low-hanging fruit" in the quest for environmental sustainability (Vandenbergh et al., 2008). As this discourse of environmental privatisation (Sandilands, 1993) continues to spread, with a key focus on households making sustainable choices, the resultant sustainability labour has added to women's workload (de Wilde & Parry, 2022; Kennedy & Kmec, 2018). Studies show that such sustainability

labour is "profoundly gendered, complex, unpaid and frequently unacknowledged by policy makers" (Lindsay et al., 2024, p. 1063). Despite seeing households as key to wider progress on sustainability issues, policymakers proceed under the assumption that either households are gender-neutral spaces (Murphy & Parry, 2021) or that the "gender gap" in household-level sustainability labour is largely unproblematic (Kennedy & Kmec, 2018). Extant studies demonstrate that it is neither. In their study with households in Australia, Lindsay and colleagues (2024) found that waste reductive as a sustainability labour is led mostly by women who bear the mental, physical and interpersonal toll of this work. Drawing on research with mothers in Scotland who participate in the sharing of children's used clothes, Ritch (2019) point to the work these mothers do to balance the needs of their families with their growing knowledge of sustainability. Relatedly, Waight's (2015) research in England found that mothers' sustainability practices are often part of their effort to construct their self-identity as good mothers. Cairns et al. (2013) too found that mothers in Canada who shop for ethically sourced and organic food for their children position themselves as good mothers who simultaneously protect the environment and ensure their child's health. These discourses serve to naturalizse care-work and environmentally sustainable consumption as "women's work" (Cairns et al., 2013) and the ensuing household-level sustainability labour thereby invokes traditional gender relations (de Wilde & Parry, 2022; Oates & McDonald, 2006).

Existing research discussed above reinforces the centrality of gender in shaping everyday sustainability practices within families. We therefore adopt a critical feminist lens of the everyday to analyse the gendered nature of sustainability labour and parenting in today's Iceland. The feminist lens of the everyday directs attention to how "the seemingly banal and trivial events of the everyday are bound into the power structures" (Rose, 1993, p. 17). Unpacking the taken-for-granted activities of everyday life offers a window into the social, cultural and economic changes unfolding around us, and how these processes play out at different "scales" from the bodily to the global (Dyck, 2005). Privileging everyday "processes" in this way also makes visible the otherwise unacknowledged familial work, described as social reproduction labour, that produces and sustains life (Bhattacharya, 2017). Gender is key to this constellation of work done within families. Focusing on how day-to-day lives within families and communities are shaped by external forces and power relations (Dyck, 2005; Smith, 1987) is useful in decoding the neoliberal logic of climate governance as well, illuminating the way people are differently situated with varying understandings and resources as opposed to the fiction of generic individuals making informed choices that by themselves can solve the climate crisis (Bee et al., 2015). A feminist lens of everyday life is equally helpful in understanding changing cultural notions around parenting and its imbrications with gender, whereby it is not the welfare state or community but individual parents who are being held responsible for all aspects of their children's lives. This has led to an expansion in the scope of parental work, as parents not only need to ensure that their children's basic needs are met but that they develop into holistic individuals who can seize the opportunities of an increasingly volatile education and labour market (Vincent, 2012)—a phenomenon we elaborate upon in the next section. Enlisting a feminist lens of the everyday can therefore enable us to understand how concerns for the environment in times of neoliberal climate governance intersect with shifting ideas of parental obligations in today's Iceland. Building on these ideas, in the next section, we situate our study of Icelandic parents'

sustainability labour within broader debates around gender equity, neoliberalism, sustainability and parenting in Iceland.

Gender, Parenting and Sustainability Work in Contemporary Iceland

The question of gender equity pervades public discourse in Iceland, bolstered by the fact that Iceland has ranked first in *Global Gender Gap Report* (World Economic Forum, 2024) for fifteen consecutive years earning it the moniker of "the most gender-equal country in the world" (World Economic Forum, 2023: np) and "the best place in the world to be a woman" (Hertz, 2016: np). Iceland has also topped the "glass-ceiling index" as the OECD country where women have the best chance of equal treatment in the workplace (The Economist Group, 2024). Critical feminist scholars have pointed to methodological flaws in these rankings, with their selective data and narrow conceptions of gender equality, which risk overconfidence and "paralysing complacency" in Icelandic society (Einarsdóttir, 2020, p. 148). Commitment to gender equality is enshrined in Iceland's social policies, too. In 2000, Iceland became the first country to give both parents equal quota rights to paid parental leave, which has proved so popular that scholars have argued that "the goal of ensuring that children [in Iceland] receive care from both parents has been achieved" (Arnalds et al., 2022, p. 370). Nonetheless, there is a gap between paid parental leave and state-subsidised childcare provisions (Arnalds & Duvander, 2023), which means either one parent must take on unpaid childcare, or rely on relatives or private day-care services. This creates additional stress for Icelandic parents, particularly mothers, and works against parents sharing caring responsibilities. This is especially the case given, that relative to other OECD countries, Icelandic women's participation in work force is high (72.6% compared to 82.6% among men) with an average of 33.2 hours per week spent in remunerated employment compared to 39.1 hours a week among men (Statistics Iceland, 2025).

Notwithstanding policies on shared parental leave, studies indicate that mothers in Iceland continue to undertake a disproportionate amount of childcare and housework, which in turn creates considerable tensions in their personal and professional lives (Auðardóttir, 2023; Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir, 2020; Júlíusdóttir et al., 2018; Rúdólfsdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). This form of gender inequity, which belies Iceland's public image is buttressed by the rising hegemony of a child-centred, and labour-intensive approach to child-rearing that Hays (1996) terms "intensive mothering". This approach is shaping how ideal motherhood is understood in today's Iceland, placing greater societal expectations on mothers (Símonardóttir & Guðmundsdóttir, 2022). Neoliberalism—which advocates for the rollback of the welfare state and seeks the extension of market forces into all areas of social life—has played a key role in bringing this intensive culture of parenting into being (Vincent, 2012).

In Iceland today, intensive parenting is manifested in parental pursuit of school choice (Auðardóttir & Kosunen, 2020; Auðardóttir & Magnúsdóttir, 2020), extra-curricular activities and home-school cooperation (Auðardóttir, 2023) and a wider discourse that emphasises mothers' duties around infant care (Símonardóttir, 2016; Símonardóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Consequently, motherhood in public discourses is idolised and seen as integral to feminine identities (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022), which prevents progress around shared parental responsibilities beyond

parental leave. An emergent body of literature has also explored how women in Iceland reconcile these lived experiences with the image of gender equity. Pétursdóttir (2012) notes that Icelandic mothers explain their disproportionate domestic workload as a matter of personal choice rather than an unwanted outcome of gendered disparity, which enables them to rationalise any gender imbalances while staying within an "aura of gender equality". This process is closely linked to neoliberal, post-feminist ideologies where the struggle for women's equality is relegated to the past, and the present is constructed as already gender equal, with any divergence understood as individual choices (McRobbie, 2009; Orgad, 2016). Hence, neoliberal forces shape women's personal lives by framing everyday inequalities as consequences of individual choices rather than of structural inequalities (Sørensen, 2017).

The growth of neoliberal ideology in Iceland is notable with privatisation of natural resources, energy and water distribution as well as a widening gap between the rich and the poor (Ólafsson, 2008, 2011; Ólafsson & Kristjánsson, 2017). Spurred by neoliberal policies, Iceland has leveraged its renewable energy sources to attract heavy industries (such as aluminium smelters) that have benefitted from favourable tax regimes, cheap electricity and minimal regulatory barriers (Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2018). The environmental and social impact of these industrial projects remains much debated in Iceland today. Similar contradictions are evident in education, too. While environmental sustainability is a key pillar of the general curriculum (Ministry of Education Science and Culture, 2011), only half of 14–18-year-olds report learning about environmental protection in school (Guðjohnsen et al., 2024), which compels families to take on the task of educating children about sustainability issues. While most of Iceland's primary sources of domestic energy are renewable the country still relies mostly on fossil fuels for transport (Monyei et al., 2024). Indeed, Iceland has been described as having a deep-rooted car culture (Heinonen et al., 2021) with underdeveloped public transport system (Monyei et al., 2024). Car ownership is a social norm and using the public transport system bears stigma (Heinonen et al., 2021). In addition, a recent study by Einarsdóttir et al. (2024) shows that the widespread supply of renewable energy in Iceland fosters misconceptions about energy being limitless and inexpensive, which can in turn, drive overconsumption with significant environmental consequences. Eating locally grown food is also a challenge in Iceland, with 50% of people's daily calorie intake coming from imported food (Halldórsdóttir & Nicholas, 2016). Eating only locally sourced food would reduce the diversity of available food by half, which makes it less viable (Halldórsdóttir & Nicholas, 2016). Parenting and sustainability labour in contemporary Iceland intersect within these wider contexts. In what follows, we explain the methodology of our study.

The Study

In this article, we draw on data from our study with parents in Iceland, which we jointly undertook in 2024–25. Iceland has a population of 383,726, with 63% of people living in and around Reykjavík (Statistics Iceland, 2024) where we carried out our study. Upon receiving full ethical approval from Brunel University of London Research Ethics Committee, we recruited participants primarily through a project Facebook page, which provided study information in both Icelandic and English. We chose Facebook

to recruit participants because more than 91% of people aged 13 and above in Iceland use Facebook (Gallup, 2021), and it is an effective means of reaching out to prospective participants. Through our Facebook posts, we invited potential participants to self-select if they were: (a) over 18 years old, (b) had a dependent child under the age of 18, (c) lived in and around the Reykjavík capital area, and (d) were keen to lead an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. The recruitment poster also mentioned that parents will be offered shopping vouchers (value of approximately 70 Euros) as a thank-you gift for their participation, which in turn helped us recruit more widely. It was important to us that participants were compensated for the time they gave us for interviews. Following our Facebook posts, parents got in touch, at which point information sheet and consent form were shared so they could learn more about the study and their rights as participants before deciding whether to take part.

In total, 27 parents across 20 families participated in the study. Of the 27 parents, 19 self-identified as women, 7 as men and 1 as non-binary (which is a legal gender identity in Iceland); 20 parents were Iceland-born, and 7 parents were of migrant-background (6 from Western Europe and 1 from Eastern Europe). The families had between 1 and 3 children aged between 0 and 17 years old. Most participants (21) had university qualifications, while six had school-level (secondary education) qualifications. Income was varied with two households reporting monthly income below 3000 Euros (450000 ISK, lowest tax-bracket for an individual), and three households with monthly income above 13,400 Euros (above 2 million ISK, highest tax bracket for an individual is 1.3 m). The rest of the participants reported being in the middle-income categories. Five participants reported being disabled and of these five, two were on disability benefits and neither worked nor studied. All the disabled participants in our sample had a university qualification, and four had postgraduate degrees. While the focus of this article is on gender, we acknowledge economic and social diversity of our sample, which provides key context for understanding the narratives of our participants. The participants met all four recruitment criteria set out earlier. The interviews were conducted by either of the two authors: the first author conducted interviews in Icelandic and the second author (who does not speak Icelandic) conducted his in English. Participants were given a choice of language prior to setting up the interviews. In total 13 parents (12 mothers and 1 non-binary parent) were interviewed one-to-one, and the rest 14 parents (7 fathers and 7 mothers) were interviewed as a couple. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted around an hour, and most were conducted in family homes. We used the same topic guide for all interviews, which were audio-recorded with participants' consent. During interviews, parents described their everyday sustainability practices, among other key issues about climate change and their approach to parenting. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the Icelandic interviews were translated into English to ensure joint analysis of data. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

We interpreted and analysed the interview data using the six-step reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. In the next two steps, we coded the transcripts and generated potential themes to discern broader patterns of meaning. The third step entailed developing and reviewing the themes against coded data. This was followed by a round of "refining, defining and naming themes" wherein we further analysed the themes, and looked at the story they tell as well as decided on the name of the themes. In

the sixth step of writing up, we tied together the data extracts and the analytical narrative while contextualising them in relation to the study and the wider literature.

The different positionalities of the two authors enriched the project and our joint approach to data collection and analysis. The first author is a born and raised Icelandic woman and mother of two with personal experience of navigating a sustainable lifestyle in Iceland. Her status as an insider helped with participant recruitment, and she was also able to relate to participants' experiences. The second author is an India-born, UK-based man who is not a parent and undertook to the study as an "outsider". However, his status as a foreigner in Iceland helped build stronger rapport with migrant-background participants who often felt more comfortable sharing their challenges of living in Iceland with him. The combination of both insider and outsider perspectives from the two authors has strengthened the study with both researchers studying interview transcripts, and probing each other's assumptions and interpretations to develop a critical understanding of the data presented here.

Parenting and Gendered Sustainability Labour in Contemporary Iceland

This section is divided into two parts. First, based on participant narratives, we unpack the structure of sustainability labour undertaken by parents—especially mothers—in our study, illuminating the way this form of work interacts with parental roles and familial relations. Second, we delve into way the gendered and inequitable nature of parents' sustainability labour are understood and rationalised by participants.

Diligent and "Super Annoying": Mothers as Prime Movers of families' Sustainability Endeavours

After we advertised the study, out of the 20 parents who initiated contact and subsequently participated in the study, 19 were mothers, who often underscored their role in spearheading sustainable practices in their families. The mothers shouldered a significant amount of physical (such as shopping and handling recycling), cognitive (organising and planning sustainable consumption practices), emotional (regulating their own and others' emotions) and pedagogical (educating others) dimensions of sustainability labour. In terms of physical and cognitive tasks of environmental sustainability, provisioning second-hand clothing and minimising food waste took up a lot of participating mothers' everyday time and effort. These are also tasks that become more complex and daunting because of children in the family. Studies have shown that parenthood heightens people's attitudes and commitments towards sustainability as they engender greater environmental generativity (Milfont et al., 2012; Ritch & Brownlie, 2016). This is largely the case for parents in our study, too, who were spurred in their sustainability practices by concerns for their children's future. But paradoxically, parenthood also created hurdles for realising their sustainability ideals as greater demands were being placed on their time and money. For example, many parents noted that while they were keen to use public transport to mitigate their carbon emissions, they found it very difficult to rely on it because of their children's needs. As Carmen puts it:

> You really need a car if you have two kids . . . It's also like a security thing. Like if something happens, you have to go to the hospital or whatever. It's good to have a car because in Iceland, public transportation doesn't work very well. Like you saw today that I was 20 minutes late [coming by bus]. You need the car. So, we bought a second-hand car.

Carmen's experience adds further nuance to our understanding of Iceland's deep-rooted culture of car dependence by linking the "need" for private transport to parenthood (Heinonen et al., 2021; Monyei et al., 2024). Other participants highlighted that having children has made daily life more complicated and halted their efforts at sustainable living. Hulda is a mother of three young children. She works full-time outside the home, and so does her husband, who works late into the evening every day. Her narrative below illustrates how reducing food waste can be a daunting and time-consuming task for mothers in dual-earner mixed-gender families:

> Hulda: I have often been more diligent. I admit I have often talked to my husband and told him I felt like I almost needed to go on maternity leave to be more effective in utilizing the food we have. [. . .]
>
> Researcher: You say you almost need to go on maternity leave, do you mean that it [reducing food waste] would be so much work and planning and such?
>
> Hulda: Yes, also because my husband works very long days, like until 6-7 pm. And then you are usually alone and when they [the children] are at this age, I feel like I have been struggling recently to find the time to [plan meals so that food waste is minimal]. I really enjoy cooking [. . .] But I need the time to better utilize what we have.

Hulda's hypothetical solution to the problem of food waste is to pause her career and go on maternity leave, rather than rearrange the sustainability labour so that she and her husband share responsibilities more equitably or question the structures that might contribute to food waste in Icelandic homes. In Hulda's case greater commitment to sustainability labour would mean an abandonment of shared parental responsibilities, a cornerstone of Nordic social policies. This echoes tendencies within the zero-waste lifestyle movements, which are often socially situated within a postfeminist framework where traditional gender roles are embraced (de Wilde & Parry, 2022).

Despite their interests in these issues, only a few of our participants had experiences of climate activism or organising outside the home. Mothers in our study instead took on a role of sustainability advocate. This non-formal pedagogical dimension of parents' sustainability labour has not been acknowledged in extant literature, which tend to focus on its physical, cognitive and emotional aspects (Lindsay et al., 2024; de Wilde & Parry, 2022; Organo et al, 2013; Oates & McDonald, 2006). This pedagogical dimension of sustainability labour is exacerbated by the need mothers felt to educate their children about environmental protection. Their pedagogical role, however, was not limited to their interactions with their children but extended to how they interacted with their partners, extended family and even co-workers. They are mothering for sustainability in most aspects of their lives. This pedagogic role is often laden with emotions such as anxiety, as Katrín describes below when asked whether she talks to her children about environmental issues:

> This is naturally a huge topic of discussion. They are quite aware of it, as I said, they are raised with this being the biggest topic always. So, I don't directly discuss it with him [the

> youngest child]. But there is this awareness, and I had such a great anxiety about disasters as a child. So, I was completely sure that something terrible was going to happen. I don't want to scare him. It's such a fine line.

Katrín explains the emotional facet of her sustainability labour as a mother. Much like other parents in our study, she is driven by environmental generativity and is keen to mitigate climate change for the benefit of future generations (Milfont & Sibley, 2011). She wants to educate her children, without generating climate anxiety among them. In this way, the emotional and pedagogical facets of environmental sustainability labour overlap. This is a recurrent theme in the accounts of participating parents. Although some fathers in our study also engaged in this educational role vis-à-vis their children, it was more common for mothers to educate both their partner and their children on sustainability issues, as illustrated by Mia:

> My husband … like now all the lights are on and I think at least one of them should be turned off. My husband is always leaving one light downstairs in the basement on.

Mia was interviewed in her living room when it was sunny outside, and the room was well lit by natural light. Mia's struggle to get her husband to turn off lights and electric appliances when not in use was a common motif in most mothers' accounts who also stressed that low electricity costs (due to Iceland's reliance on renewable energy sources for domestic consumption) often acted as a disincentive for reducing electricity usage (Einarsdóttir et al., 2024). During another interview, a mother became self-conscious talking to us about keeping lights on unnecessarily and in the middle of the interview went to the next room to switch one off. Another issue where mothers noted lack of cooperation from their partners was around using leftover foods in the next day's meals. As a mother put it: "My husband has a really hard time eating leftovers … Which means … a lot of food waste."

Therefore, in some of the families, there were clear points of tension around the mother being the lead sustainability pedagogue, even if the father professed green commitments without doing sustainability labour. This led to the mothers often describing their effort as nagging or a nuisance, adding further emotional toll as explained by Amalía below:

> I wanted to go really hard line with if we can buy something that doesn't have like the extra packaging, but I became super annoying, and it was super difficult to just buy what they wanted and just buy in the store. So, I kind of had to let some of that go.

Amalía is framed by her husband and children as super annoying, which illustrates how emotionally difficult the role of sustainability pedagogue is. It demands both emotional investment and regulation. Besides being a site of climate anxieties, it is also one where the risk of being seen as a troublemaker within your own family is ever-present. This is relational work as, Amalía had to "let it go" because she was labelled as "super annoying" by her family. In a similar vein, another mother in our study, Rósa, said:

> I think they [my daughters] will be a bit like their mother, listening to me ramble. My husband sometimes just says something like: "Sometimes we just need to be fun!"

Rósa here describes her sustainability labour as rambling (or "röfla" in Icelandic) and later in the interview as nagging (Icelandic: "nöldra"), which positions her role of

sustainability pedagogue within families as that of "environmentalist killjoy" (Howard, 2023). Rósa's husband sees her pedagogical sustainability labour as standing in the way of "fun". Both Rósa and Amalía are in the double bind of wanting to take on pedagogical sustainability labour, which risks causing tensions in the family, while also maintaining a good relationship with them.

The mothers' pedagogical sustainability labour extends to family, friends and co-workers, and is often tempered with tensions, for example, around gifts from extended family to their child, which was mentioned by several mothers but no fathers. This involves mothers having to have difficult discussions with their own parents around buying second-hand clothes for their children or to emphasise that they preferred used toys as gifts for their children. On her buying second-hand cloth diapers, Carmen's mother described it as a "bit disgusting". Other grandparents treated buying used clothes as a sign of poverty rather than sustainability. The mothers in our study took great care in navigating these discussions and put their point across without damaging relationships. This emotional facet is integral to mothers' sustainability labour. Previous research shows that some younger environmentalists avoid discussing climate issues with older generation to avoid uncomfortable situations (Howard, 2023). It is less feasible for mothers in our study to be silent about their sustainability practices with older relatives as they directly impact their children. Thus, mothers' pedagogical and emotional sustainability labour interacts directly with both intergenerational communication and motherhood duties.

In summary, gender is pivotal to which parent, in a mixed-gender household, is the driving force behind everyday sustainability endeavours and how the concomitant labour is shouldered. In these parental narratives, environmental sustainability labour encompasses physical, cognitive, emotional and pedagogical facets, which to varying degrees overlap. When pulled together, the otherwise overlooked mundane practices of everyday parenting paint a picture of how *gendered* sustainability work is: from the story of the vegan parents where the mother is mostly responsible for making necessary accommodation for the child's vegan diet in everyday life, to the mother who spends great deal of time researching and learning about cloth-diapers for her babies and to the mother who is the only person in her family who turns off the lights when they are not in use. The fathers who took part in our study were not uninterested in sustainability issues, however. To the contrary, they often stressed at length their keen interest in mitigating climate change, but during our interviews they frequently focused their energies on macro issues, debating transport policies and city planning, or pondering the future of the aviation industry. In cases where only mothers were interviewed, they shared that their male partners or co-parents were interested in environmental sustainability in more abstract terms and made demonstrably lesser contributions to everyday sustainability labour such as managing food waste or provisioning second-hand clothing, which became the mothers' responsibilities. Tangible sustainability practices disproportionately became women's domain, turning sustainability labour into an extension of mothers' caring duties and general social reproductive work (Lindsay et al., 2024; Oates & McDonald, 2006).

"I don't feel its extra work" Making sense of mothers' disproportionate share of the sustainability labour

As noted earlier, gender equality is regarded as a cornerstone of Icelandic social policy and cultural life. In this context, how do parents make sense of the gendered inequalities in sustainability labour analysed in the last section? Some of the mothers in our study rationalised these gender discrepancies by emphasising the joy of undertaking sustainability practices, recognising them as effortless pursuits and not as work. For instance, Ásta said: "I actually enjoy this [sustainability labour] . . . This is also a hobby. I find it more enjoyable."

Carmen recognised the amount of work she puts into sustainability practices, describing it as "invisible work", and yet justified its burden by invoking ideas of fun and enjoyment:

Carmen: For example, just the cloth diaper thing. That was a lot of work in researching how to do it, because I didn't know how to do it. And this is quite complicated. You have to know a lot. It's not that easy. [. . .] I have to research a lot and read a lot. Also, as you say, to buy second hand. I am the one looking for who is selling. How can I buy? Where can I buy? I am doing all of this invisible work.

Researcher: And how does it make you feel?

Carmen: I mean, in a way, it's fun. I mean, I enjoy kind of doing that.

Similarly, Amalía shoulders much of her family's sustainability labour, such as recycling and reducing food waste. She takes great effort in biking to different supermarkets to buy discounted groceries that are past or approaching their expiration date thus saving money while reducing food waste. While acknowledging that she does most of the sustainability labour, she rationalises it in the following manner:

> I look at it as like, okay, this is this is really good quality me-time. I'm riding my bike, I'm saving money. I'm also preventing food waste. So, to me, I'm checking a lot of boxes that make me feel good about myself. And I'm like, oh my God, this is amazing. So, it actually gives me energy. So, I don't feel like it's extra work. I just I think it's fun.

Ásta, Carmen, and Amalía resolve their potential worries around gendered divisions of sustainability labour with affective notions of fun and enjoyment. Although sustainability labour is entwined with social reproduction work (Bhattacharya, 2017), if the former is not framed as legitimate work but as a hobby, fun or "me-time" then it obviates equal division. This resonates with studies that have found that unequal division of labour persists amongst heterosexual couples, often because housework and care work are not recognised as work (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2020). In other families, inequities in sustainability labour were framed in terms of different sets of sustainability interests as noted by Emma and Karl in their joint interview:

> Researcher: Being more ecofriendly or taking certain steps or thinking about it, do you think you're both equally interested, or one person takes the lead?
>
> Karl: I think we are in different areas.

> Emma: Yeah, I think so too.
>
> Karl:I despise the fossil fuel industry, and she is more on the maybe cut the meat out more [. . .]
>
> Emma: I'm more interested in trying to decrease our meat consumption and our like animal products consumption. And you're thinking more about the . . . other things. But we are I mean we've been pretty agreed on, for instance, the cloth diapers.
>
> Karl: Yeah.
>
> Researcher: And whose idea was it in the first place?
>
> Emma: Mine.

While Karl thinks a lot about sustainable urban planning and transport, listening to podcasts on these topics, his inputs were largely in the realm of ideas, while Emma undertakes concrete, everyday tasks of making their family lives more environmentally sustainable. Although they are both committed to sustainability, Emma is the primary driver, generating actionable ideas and solutions for their household. For instance, she conducted online research on the benefits and maintenance of cloth diapers for children and subsequently adopted their use. Emma and Karl explain their divergent sustainability effort as a matter of individual interest and choice. This pattern is reflected in other interviews too and is intimately connected to neoliberal governance of family lives and post-feminism (McRobbie, 2009; Orgad, 2016).

In a joint interview, Mila and Francisco disagreed on whether their sustainability labour was gendered and then resolved the question thus:

> Francisco: Yeah, I think Mila does all the third shift in our household, I would say . . . [But] it's not regarding gender [. . .]
>
> Mila: I think it has totally 100% to do with gender, my Icelandic is so good because I never had the choice [not to learn it] . . . because women just always automatically have it [the responsibility].
>
> Researcher: Yeah. And what does that sort of make you feel?
>
> Mila: You know, I'm kind of like a doer. You know, like, I, you know, I it's just what I want to get things done . . . Sometimes it's easier to just do it myself because . . . I have this maybe high standards, like buying always the Icelandic things.

Mila and Francisco both migrated to Iceland as adults. Francisco pins Mila's ability to take on various familial tasks, especially outside the home, to her proficiency in Icelandic. They frame this work as "third shift" given this term's recent popularity in Icelandic media (Pomrenke, 2023). Mila acknowledges this additional work to be gendered and unequal and points out that because of her gender, she bears more responsibility for child-rearing and housework, including sustainability work, and this need has compelled her to learn Icelandic more quickly. She argues, women "automatically" have to step up and assume responsibility in these situations.

When we asked parents whether sustainability labour was gendered in their households, they were either reluctant to discuss this matter or provided brief responses that needed more diligent follow-up questions. Many participants would start by stating that

sustainability labour was equally divided between the mother and the father, but when asked to elaborate with examples it often turned out that mothers drove these practices, as illustrated above. The mothers in our study noted that there were unequal division of sustainability labour in their family but would often promptly rationalise those inequities with explanations beyond gender. These insights add to research that show dual-earner heterosexual couples tend to use gender-neutral explanations to justify women's disproportionate share of household labour (Calarco et al., 2021; van Hooff, 2011). Moreover, mothers in our study are operating within Iceland's "aura of gender equality" (Pétursdóttir, 2012) where people overlook or explain away any apparent gender inequalities. Thus, they reconciled their commitment to gender equality as a cornerstone of Icelandic society with their lived experiences of gendered division of sustainability labour at home. This is also the case with migrant-background mothers who often cited gender equality and natural environment of Iceland as key motivations behind their move.

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented the first study to systematically explore the link between parenting and environmental sustainability in contemporary Iceland with a focus on the labour that sustains parental sustainability engagements. In doing so, the original insights presented here have contributed simultaneously to research on "green parenthood" (Shrum, 2021; Ekholm, 2020; Milfont & Sibley, 2011; Milfont et al., 2020) and that on the interface between environmental sustainability and domestic labour (Lindsay et al., 2024; de Wilde & Parry, 2022; Kennedy & Kmec, 2018, Organo et al, 2013; Oates & McDonald, 2006). We have identified a paradox at the heart of parental sustainability labour: concerns for their children's future galvanised parents' sustainability practices while simultaneously the demands of parenthood on time, energy and money erected new barriers for parents to realise their sustainability goals. This paradox nuances our understanding of the relationship between parenthood and sustainability practices (Shrum, 2021; Milfont et al., 2020). Moreover, based on parental accounts, we have consolidated current understanding of everyday sustainability labour by theorising its quadripartite structure comprising physical, cognitive, emotional and pedagogical dimensions. We contend that performing this sustainability labour has become a "moral rationality" (Duncan, 2005) of child-rearing in these families—it is seen by parents as the right thing to do both for future generations and the planet (morality) and it offers a framework for parents' consumption practices and decision making (rationality). This kind of parental work is buttressed by neoliberal climate governance regimes on one hand and the growing hegemony of intensive parenting on the other. This is reflected in arguments that parents have a "special moral duty" to do all they can to mitigate climate change because they "owe it" to future generations (Cripps, 2017: 316). The ensuing sustainability labour has added to the workload of parents, especially mothers, who disproportionately bear the responsibility of making their households environmentally sustainable. Any policy on sustainability that fails to consider how gendered this work is risks reproducing traditional gender roles.

Some parents in our study argued in favour of structural changes to combat the climate crisis and even spoke of collective responsibilities, with a few participants contributing to community-based free fridges (or "freedges") dotted across the city (see Friskapur, 2025)

to cut down on food waste. Barring these isolated instances of food sharing and despite their arguments, the parents mostly acted in individual capacities, for the benefit of their children and families, with little tangible effort in radically transforming current economic arrangements, addressing root causes of environmental degradation or pushing for redistribution of resources and power. In this sense, their sustainability labour is anchored in neoliberal approaches to climate governance. Further, mothers in our study reconciled the unequal and gendered division of sustainability labour in their families with their cherished commitments to gender equity by reframing this form of labour as outcomes of personal preference, a hobby or as "fun" activities, which reflect post-feminist, neoliberal ideologies (McRobbie, 2009; Orgad, 2016). Such reframing enabled these mothers to justify their disproportionate workload while retaining the "aura of gender equality" (Pétursdóttir, 2012) that is all pervasive in "the most gender-equal country in the world" (World Economic Forum, 2023: np). We therefore argue that gendered politics of child-rearing are shaping and is being shaped by neoliberal climate governance, which has hitherto received little scholarly attention in the Nordic context and beyond (Ekholm, 2020; Sihvonen et al., 2024). Although the focus of this article has been on gender, a closer analysis of how social class, race and geography intersect with these structures is needed in future studies. While our participants were of various income levels, the vast majority had university degrees (21 out of 27), and all were digitally savvy with proficiency in Icelandic and/or English and thus had better access to information on sustainability issues.

Iceland's strides on gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2024), shared parental responsibilities (Arnalds et al., 2022), and environmental sustainability (Heimsmarkmiðin um sjálfbæra þróun, n.d..) can inadvertently create an atmosphere where the growth of new forms of gender inequities, such as those around household sustainability labour can get overlooked. This is likely to become more salient as Iceland's quest for achieving carbon neutrality by 2040 would require individual and household-level action, in line with the country's growing neoliberal climate governance regime (Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2018). Our analysis suggests that a more just and equitable approach to policy in this regard will need to consider the complex relationship between households, gendered parental responsibilities, environmental generativity, and sustainability that we have mapped in this article.

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