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From Restrictive to Permissive Legislation: Egg Donation in Norway

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Abstract

In 2020, following years of political debate, the Norwegian parliament passed legislation that eased restrictions on assisted reproductive technologies, including egg donation. This article examines the implications of this legislative shift in a country that had previously been characterised by highly restrictive policies on assisted reproductive technologies. The transition from a restrictive to a more permissive regulatory framework offers a unique opportunity to explore both continuity and change in cultural norms surrounding reproduction, gender, family and kinship. To investigate these dynamics, we conducted interviews with 20 women of reproductive age who were potentially eligible to donate eggs. Our aim was to explore the cultural values shaping their reflections on egg donation. Whilst political and media discourse has largely emphasised the benefits for recipients of donated eggs, feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the experiences and motivations of donors. This study contributes to the field by focusing on women who have no direct experience with egg donation and no particular expertise or personal investment in the topic. By doing so, we shed light on how broader cultural values inform individual-level negotiations and meaning-making around reproductive technologies. Situated within the context of a Nordic welfare state—where ideals such as social equality, gender equality and universal access to welfare services are deeply embedded—we find that the women's attitudes towards egg donation reflect core Norwegian cultural values. At the same time, these attitudes reveal underlying tensions between competing values, suggesting potential for normative change. The decision to donate eggs emerges as a complex and ambivalent one, particularly in relation to the biological and social implications of having a genetic connection to a child born through donation.

Keywords

assisted reproductive technologies; cultural values; egg donation; family; gender; Norway; social equality

1. Introduction

Within Europe, the legislation regarding assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) and access to them has varied immensely among countries, ranging from a laissez-faire approach to more restrictive legislation. The most restrictive countries in this regard have been Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and Norway (Engeli & Allison, 2017). In 2020, after many years of political debate, the Norwegian parliament voted in favour of a more permissive legal framework, including access to egg donation. The aim of this article is to explore how women in Norway reflect on the legalisation of egg donation and the possibility of being egg donors.

So far, research on ARTs in Norway has mostly focused on policy and regulations (Melhuus, 2012; Spilker, 2017; Spilker & Lie, 2007, 2016; Stuvøy, 2024; Stuvøy et al., 2021). The international literature on egg donation has explored the motivations of women who have donated eggs and how they reflect on this experience, as well as women who have received donated eggs, often analysed within the framework of commercialisation and a transnational reproductive bioeconomy (e.g., Molas & Perler, 2024; Waldby, 2019). Qualitative studies have included interviews with egg donors, thus directing focus towards women who have made the decision to donate (Almeling, 2017; Closas, 2021; Haylett, 2012; Lafuente-Funes et al., 2022; Molas & Perler, 2020; Orobitg & Salazar, 2006). Our study, however, focuses on "women in general," by interviewing women in the age group eligible for egg donation but who had no particular interest in or experience with egg donation, and asking them to reflect on the recent legal change and the possibility of signing up as donors themselves. The focus on "women in general" represents an important contribution to the field of ART research, both in the Norwegian context and internationally, as most previous qualitative studies have concentrated on donors. This article, therefore, offers a unique approach to exploring how women of reproductive age conceptualise reproduction, gender, family, and kinship, and how cultural norms and values are shaped through interaction with this new biotechnical possibility.

The context of this study is a welfare society with a general support for gender equality, social equality, and equal access to social welfare, where increasing social diversity and individualism are challenging more traditional ideas of equality and how it can be achieved. The political change from a restrictive to a more open approach to ARTs gives a unique opportunity to study continuity and change in cultural norms related to human reproduction, gender, family, and kinship—using ARTs as a "looking glass" (Franklin & Inhorn, 2025). In line with this, the aim of the analysis is to explore the cultural norms and values that women draw upon when reflecting on egg donation and their potential or hypothetical involvement in the practice, as donors. Which cultural ideals and practices emerge as particularly salient in the women's reflections on egg donation? What tensions and contradictions arise, and what do they reveal about traditional and changing understandings of reproduction?

2. Fertility and Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Norway

Between 2010 and 2023, Norway's total fertility rate declined from 1.98 to 1.40, reaching a historically low level (Statistics Norway, 2024). During the same period, the average age of mothers at first birth increased, the number of families with three or more children declined, and a growing proportion of the population remained childless (Hart & Kravdal, 2020). This is a global trend, and the reasons are complex. According to the Norwegian Directorate of Health (2022), it is estimated that 10% of all couples require assistance to

conceive, and the use of ART has increased substantially in recent years due to technical advancements and more liberal policies.

In Norway, the welfare state forms the basis for the general welfare of all citizens, such as the provision of childcare and elderly care, education, and basic economic security (Melby et al., 2008). Over the past few decades, Norway has developed a comprehensive public health service for assisted reproduction, offering medical examination and three free IVF trials (Romundstad, 2019). Initially, these services were only available to heterosexual couples, but they were later extended to same-sex female couples and single women (Stuvøy et al., 2021). Private clinics have taken on a significant portion of clients, providing all treatments at a cost. Compared to the private clinics, the public health services have longer queues, and for some services, such as egg freezing without medical indication, the private clinics are the sole providers (Førde, 2024).

Norway was among the first countries to implement legal regulations governing ARTs, having implemented them as early as 1987. The law was entitled the Act on Artificial Procreation (*Lov om kunstig befruktning*) and was later implemented into the more general Act on Biotechnology in 1994. The law was revised twice in the 2000s, but until recently, Norway's legal regulations have been among the strictest in the world, along with those in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland (Bleikli et al., 2004; Engeli & Allison, 2017; Melhuus, 2012). In Norway, the Christian Democratic Party has been particularly active in shaping the debate, especially by launching the notion of the "sorting society" as the greatest risk associated with a liberal biotechnology law (Melhuus, 2012).

Equality and, in particular, gender equality, which represents the most common interpretation of the term "likestilling" in the Norwegian context, is widely regarded as a core societal value in Norway (Danielsen et al., 2013). The ideal of gender equality is shared across the political spectrum and generally among the public. In line with this, political and public debates on ARTs in Norway have been strongly influenced by gender norms, wherein eggs and sperm are frequently discussed as symbolic representations of women and men, respectively (Lie, 2012, 2015). When it comes to the question of egg donation, which for a long time was a politically contested issue in Norway, the public debates reveal significant cultural and political diversity. Social democratic parties have long maintained that policies on ART should be guided by principles of gender equality, arguing that if sperm donation is permitted, egg donation should likewise be legal (Lie et al., 2011; Spilker & Lie, 2007). In contrast, conservative parties have contended that such policies should reflect biological differences between women and men, asserting that there are inherent limits to the application of gender equality in this domain (Melhuus, 2022; Spilker & Lie, 2007). During the parliamentary debates on egg donation preceding the 2020 amendment to the Biotechnology Act, the principle of social equality was broadly endorsed (Stuvøy et al., 2021). At that time, political emphasis on equality and equal rights extended to include women and men, same-sex couples, single individuals, economic equity, and equitable access to fertility treatment throughout Norway.

In 2020, a significant shift occurred in Norwegian policy through amendments to the Biotechnology Act. There was near consensus across the political spectrum not only to legalise egg donation but also to permit access to early ultrasound and non-invasive prenatal testing, both of which had previously been prohibited to prevent the emergence of a so-called "sorting society" (Stuvøy et al., 2021). Access to ART for single women, as well as egg freezing for social—not solely medical—reasons, was also legalised. At this time, political discourse emphasised the availability of new technologies, the importance of equitable access across social groups, and

the need for Norway to be forward-looking rather than lagging behind in technological development (Stuvøy et al., 2021). Since 2003, sperm donation has required identifiable donors, and the same requirement now applies to egg donation. This means that children conceived through donated gametes have the right to know the identity of the donor upon reaching the age of 15.

The egg donor has been largely absent from political discourse surrounding egg donation in Norway throughout the 2000s (Kristensen & Lie, 2023; Stuvøy, 2024). However, the new legislation has introduced several regulations specifically concerning the donor. In addition to the age restriction (25–35 years), the law imposes a limit on the number of donations (a maximum of three retrievals per donor) and stipulates that donors are not entitled to information about the outcome of their donation. This means that a donor will not know whether a child has resulted from the donation unless they are contacted after a minimum of 15 years. Another key provision in the guidelines is that donors should not receive any form of reward beyond modest financial compensation. This is framed as "altruistic donation with modest compensation," which—after considerable debate—was defined as compensation for time spent, rather than for medical risk or psychological burden (Stuvøy, 2024, p. 117). Altruism, in this context, refers to the motivation for donating eggs, which, according to both political debates and the Norwegian Directorate of Health's informational text for potential donors, is described as a desire to "help individuals who are unable to have children by other means" (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2021).

3. Theoretical Perspectives

To guide the analysis, we draw on theories and concepts that belong to the field of cultural analysis. The purpose of cultural analysis is to develop analytical tools for interpreting cultural ideals and the ways in which they are practised but also changed by everyday behaviours (Gullestad, 1992, 2002). Our analyses are informed by theoretical frameworks and concepts developed by Norwegian cultural scholars to identify norms and values specific to the Norwegian cultural context.

Equality is considered an overall ideal as well as a cultural norm in Norway. As social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad (1992) has observed, Norwegians are obsessed with the norm of equality, often confusing the meaning of this term with "being the same" (in Norwegian, both terms are covered by the same word: *lik*). This means that, in Norwegian culture, there is an understanding of equality as sameness: To be equal, you must be, or have, the same (Døving, 2020; Gullestad, 1992). This is indicated in the recent political debate regarding the amendment of the biotechnology law, where equal access to reproductive technologies was a prominent argument (Stuvøy et al., 2021). At the same time, there was a new emphasis on individual choice compared to previous political debates concerned with legal restrictions, indicating a new ideal of the modern woman making an informed personal choice.

Norwegian society has traditionally been family-oriented, with the nuclear family serving as both the cultural ideal and the primary legal and social organising unit (Døving, 2020; Gullestad, 1984/2001). This ideal implies that a new couple is expected to establish an independent household, reflecting the core value of autonomy. While gender norms are evolving and an increasing number of individuals live in single-person households and households consisting of complicated family relations (for example, due to divorce), it has become more common for same-sex couples to establish conventional nuclear families with children (Ravn et al., 2016). Gullestad (1984/2001) highlights that the Norwegian home is a deeply private and symbolically significant

space, central to family unity and identity. This is further reinforced through home decoration, which serves as an expression of the family's lifestyle and values. In line with this strong emphasis on the nuclear family, having children is still the ideal for most women and men in Norway, although the number of children per woman is decreasing. Aligned with the possibly conflicting ideals of gender equality and individualism, having children should ideally be a joint decision between partners, meaning that they wait until both are ready, and ideally equally willing (Ravn & Lie, 2013). This corresponds to two different characteristics of Norwegian culture, as being both family-oriented and highly individualistic. Individual rights and individual freedom are core values, with independence being an ideal both in upbringing and adult life (Gullestad, 1992).

ARTs represent not only new ways of making children but also a need for producing parenthood (Thompson, 2005). When gametes are donated, parenthood becomes ambiguous, prompting debates about biological, genetic, and social parenthood. In discussing questions of kinship relations after IVF, the social anthropologist Sarah Franklin (2013) suggests the term "relatively biological" to represent the new understanding of parenthood and kinship, as people try to come to terms with the new technological interventions. Whereas ARTs create new perceptions of kinship, the traditional understanding of biologically determined parenthood remains influential in the debate about what procedures should be legal: what is understood as just a helping hand, and what is understood as being "against nature." Kinship symbolises the relation between nature and culture, according to Strathern (1992), and this relationship is being redefined with the inclusion of ARTs. In Norway, the definition of motherhood has gained significant attention in the political debate about egg donation, with the claim that the question of who the mother is should never arise (Spilker & Lie, 2007). Also, the difference of gametes inside and outside the body has been referred to in the debate, with an emphasis on sperm cells having "gone astray," whereas the egg cells have been perceived as integral to the female body—until egg donation.

Bearing in mind that the family and the home are very private matters in Norwegian culture, egg donation may potentially create tension in the demarcation of family and kinship relations. Theoretically, a 15-year-old child may suddenly appear, creating a "crack in the door" of the private family and household (Milligan et al., 2010). This scenario raises numerous questions about new relationships, not only with the donor but also with all family members, and the unity of the family.

4. Methods and Data

To explore the questions about traditional and changing cultural values, we draw on qualitative interviews with 20 women aged 25–35, which means that they would legally qualify to become egg donors based on their age. Neither prior knowledge nor experience of egg donation was a recruitment criterion, nor were family situation or other life circumstances. The interviews were conducted by the authors and a research assistant, and the participants were recruited through the extended networks of the interviewers, as well as through snowball sampling, which means that some of the interviewees helped us to identify more women that we could interview (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015).

Our aim was not to achieve representativeness in a statistical sense but rather to gain insight into a broad spectrum of understandings and opinions. To a large extent, this was successfully achieved. The women we interviewed constitute a diverse group, exhibiting considerable variation across multiple dimensions. They lived in different parts of Norway and had various life situations and careers. Half of the women had children

or were pregnant at the time of the interview, four were single, two were in same-sex relationships, and one defined herself as bisexual. Some worked in the public sector, whilst others worked in the private sector. Some held permanent positions, whilst others held temporary jobs. Although we explicitly tried to recruit women from different social classes to ensure that the study would include the representation of a wide range of perspectives, in retrospect, we see that most of the participants would probably qualify as "middle class," which in a Norwegian context is a broad and rather heterogeneous category in terms of social and economic factors. This is not so surprising, as the middle class tends to be overrepresented in qualitative research where recruitment takes place through the personal and professional networks of researchers (Kristensen & Ravn, 2015). None of the informants had personal experience of egg donation, and only one had experience of ART. To protect the anonymity of the informants, we have assigned them fictitious names. The interviews were conducted one and a half years after the legal change. They took place either face-to-face or digitally (half and half). The interviews lasted for between 30 and 90 minutes and were organised around the following topics: background information (age, family situation, education, and occupation), general knowledge about egg donation ("What do you know about egg donation and the regulation of it?"), personal opinion ("Have you ever donated, or would you consider donating, your eggs?"), and reflections and justification ("What are the reasons for your decision, and what would motivate you to become an egg donor"?). The women were not provided with any information regarding the legal, medical, or practical aspects of egg donation prior to the interviews. Information was only introduced during the interviews in cases where participants explicitly requested clarification or feedback on their own assumptions, or when misunderstandings impeded the flow of the conversation. The decisions to recruit participants without personal experience of egg donation and not to provide them with prior information about the topic before the interviews were based on the assumption that participants' immediate—and potentially exploratory—reflections would offer a particularly valuable point of departure for investigating cultural meaning-making. This is especially pertinent in the field of reproduction, where the personal and the social are so closely intertwined.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and when working with the article, the authors have translated selected quotes from Norwegian to English. During translation, we made minor adjustments to ensure that the quotes aligned with the original meaning as closely as possible.

The overarching question that guided our analysis was: How do the informants explain and justify their perceptions of, and positions towards, egg donation, both in relation to their own reproductive pasts and future and within the broader cultural context? To structure our analytical approach to the interview material, we drew inspiration from Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis and Clarke's (2005) situational analysis. Taking these two approaches on board, we began by familiarising ourselves with the data through repeated readings of each interview before we started identifying words and sentences of particular relevance for the research questions, labelling them with descriptive codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Examples of these codes include concerns about medical treatment, questions related to legal regulations, dynamics within the partner relationship and ideals of parenthood. The next step was to group the codes into a set of preliminary themes, which we critically evaluated against the coded data and the data set as a whole to ensure they represented what we had found in the interviews. In line with the cultural analysis, the relation to the broader context in which the interviews were situated is also of great importance and something we wanted to include in our analysis. To support this process, we adopted perspectives from Clarke's situational analysis, which is specifically concerned with situating personal narratives by tracing their origins and understanding their significance (Clarke, 2005, p. 182). More specifically, we constructed

positional maps, which are visual representations of the major positions articulated (and not articulated) in the data in relation to key discursive axes of variation, difference, concern, and controversy surrounding the many complex issues regarding egg donation in general and being an egg donor in particular. In our case, this involved broadening the analytical scope of the interviews by emphasising their cultural and social contexts.

This interview study is based on a limited dataset with acknowledged strengths and limitations. Its primary strength lies in examining processes of change within a specific cultural context. We argue that the depth of the empirical material, together with the contextual specificity and the analytical approaches employed, offers valuable contributions to a research field concerned with broader societal transformations in the domain of reproduction, despite the relatively small sample size.

5. Egg Donation as a Positive Development and an Opportunity to "Do Good"

The overall impression we gained from the interviews regarding the participants' understanding of and attitudes towards egg donation was that they viewed the recent legislative change in a generally positive light. None of the participants expressed disagreement with the legalisation, and aside from a few minor critical reflections on specific aspects of the arrangement, such as the view that the financial compensation was low relative to the effort involved in donating eggs, the prevailing attitude was that the new law represented a positive development. This positive stance was expressed either explicitly (e.g., "I think the new law is a good thing"), sometimes with notable enthusiasm (e.g., "I am very happy about the new regulations"), or more implicitly (e.g., "I cannot see any negative implications of egg donation becoming available in Norway").

Concurrently, we found that most participants were not well informed about the specifics of the new legislation, and that some misunderstandings were persistent. These misunderstandings typically included a lack of awareness that the donor's identity would be accessible to the child upon request at the age of 15, whilst the donor would not receive any information about potential offspring. Some participants were unaware that the law prohibits open donation arrangements, such as donating to a friend or relative. It is also relevant to note that, in these initial expressions of support, the concept of donation and the role of the donor were generally not mentioned. The lack of familiarity with the legal details, along with the absence of references to the donor, suggests that the generally positive attitude towards the new law was not based on detailed knowledge of the arrangement or its regulatory framework, nor on deep reflection about what egg donation entails in practice. Rather, it appears to be motivated by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering experienced by women and couples affected by involuntary childlessness, which is widely recognised as the most pressing social issue that the legalisation of egg donation is intended to address, as evidenced by both the public debates preceding the legalisation and the text of the act (Stuvøy, 2024; Stuvøy et al., 2021).

An example of how this positive attitude was articulated can be found in the conversation with Anne. Anne was in her mid-30s, married with a stepchild, and planning to have another child with her partner. When asked about her reflections on egg donation, Anne said the following:

> First and foremost, I look upon the legalisation [of egg donation] as a great opportunity. I strongly support the new law. Moreover, I am not negative towards the idea of being an egg donor myself or using a donated egg if that would be relevant. So, I am very happy about the new regulations.

As Anne saw it, the new law represented a positive development that she really cared about ("a great opportunity," "strongly support," and "happy").

Another example of this positive engagement with the legalisation of egg donation was provided by Cecilie. Cecilie was 31 years old, married, and pregnant with her first child. When the interviewer asked what she thought about egg donation, she replied:

> I find egg donation exciting as it is a new opportunity in Norway. This makes it fascinating, and we still do not know a lot about the long-term effects, even though there have been many discussions about it with experts involved before the politicians finally made the decision to make it legal in Norway. My overarching notion is that I am okay with egg donation as long as it is legal. I would never have considered it if it was not legal.

In the interview, Cecilie expressed a positive attitude towards the recent legalisation of egg donation, using words such as "exciting" and "fascinating." For Cecilie, the legalisation held a significant value—not only because it enabled the procedure to be carried out in Norway but also because it signified state approval.

From a different vantage point, Fiona, 30 years old, single, and without children, also supported egg donation by expressing her support for those families who want but cannot have a child:

> I think it could be a good thing for those families who do not have any eggs that they can use. I think the question of egg donation exposes some exciting ethical dilemmas, but I see the new law as a mostly positive development, as it makes it possible for a family to have something they really want to have and for a child to have a family who really wants it.

In line with this, Fiona also expressed an interest in becoming an egg donor herself when asked about it in the interview:

> Yes, I have been considering it. Why? Because I think it would be nice to help out in this way. To make someone's wish for a child come true, and hopefully also give a child a nice home with parents who have really been thinking a lot about having a child. I have also been thinking….Or at least tried to think about potential negative things that could happen, and that I would not want to be part of, but my conclusion is that there are probably more positive than negative consequences.

As we see, for Fiona, it was not only a child and parenthood that was potentially produced through egg donation, but also a family. And the idea of a happy family with parents and children who love each other was what would motivate her to become an egg donor. As we will see later, however, quite a few of the women we talked to were worried that this happy outcome cannot be taken for granted, causing worries and concern for the potential egg donor.

6. Egg Donation as a Way to Produce Equality and Sameness

In line with this appreciation of reproduction and the expanded potential for parenthood and family life, we found that the women framed their arguments in terms of promoting equal opportunities for having children

and forming a family. Although egg donation is sometimes framed in terms of "one woman helping another" (Haylett, 2012), in this context, it was generally expressed in terms of creating a (real) family.

This is exemplified by another quote from the interview with Cecilie, who said that she supported the legalisation of egg donation because it would enable more people to experience the joy of pregnancy. When asked whether she would consider becoming an egg donor herself, Cecilie elaborated on this point:

> There are pros and cons. Yes, because it is nice for those who are not able to have a child without it, like, if they do not have healthy eggs themselves. It's like promoting more equality. It's a nice thought. If someone has struggled [to become pregnant] for a long time and gets to the point where they see that without egg donation it will not happen, I think it is nice [the legal access to egg donation].

Rather than offering a definitive personal standpoint on becoming an egg donor, Cecilie articulated a more general argument in support of the legalisation. She emphasised how the arrangement enables infertile individuals and couples to conceive and have children. This framing of egg donation as a means of producing equality between fertile and infertile people was explicitly described as a way of "promoting more equality."

The argument about equality also appeared in the interview with Dina, who was in her early 30s, in a same-sex relationship, and did not have any children. When asked to share her reflections about egg donation, she answered:

> Generally, I think it is a good thing, as it is not always the man who is the problem. And in that sense, it [egg donation] creates a more equal situation where the couple can have some kind of assistance, no matter which party is kind of hampering the possibility [for reproduction]. In same-sex relationships, obviously, I think it is a good thing that you can exchange eggs. Or if one of them has had medical tests showing that they cannot be pregnant themselves, and the partner is willing to do so.

As with Cecilie, Dina's underlying argument in favour of egg donation was to make it possible for more people to have children if they want to. Whilst in the previous quotes the women had taken the heterosexual couple as the self-evident basis for their reflections, Dina introduced other axes of difference—namely, the distinctions between couples with an infertile man and couples with an infertile woman, and between heterosexual couples and same-sex couples. The underlying argument, however, was the same—that more people should be able to have children if they want them and that "technical assistance" should be available to enable this to happen.

This inclusive and equality-promoting perspective on egg donation aligns with how Line, a woman in her mid-30s, married to a man and mother of two children, explained her positive attitude towards egg donation and the legalisation of it:

> I think everyone should be allowed to have children on an equal footing, in the sense that there should be no difference.
>
> [Interviewer: What do you mean by difference?]
>
> I think about being in a same-sex relationship or being single and wanting a child, for example.

As Line saw it, the ways in which people organise their personal lives and who they partner with in romantic relationships should not be an obstacle to having children, if and when ART can help.

Ines was even more explicit about this inclusive and diverse approach to reproduction. Ines was in her early 30s, bisexual but currently in a relationship with a man, and without children. She used the argument of unfairness from a biological perspective when asked about her opinion on the legalisation of egg donation:

> I think that reproduction, having a baby, is, from the beginning, a huge biological unfairness. Lesbian couples cannot at present reproduce, except together with a man, but all, or many, heterosexual people can….I have several friends who are lesbian or bisexual, and some are just sterile, so I think in a way that it is kind of unfair that they do not have as many alternatives…

In Ines' view, technical assistance for reproduction should be available for everyone, and in particular for people who, for various reasons, cannot have children without it. In this way, ARTs, such as egg donation, create possibilities to overcome even biological differences and produce equality where there was previously inequality.

To summarise, equality emerged as a particularly salient value in our data. Yet, unlike many other contexts in which equality is discussed in Norway—where it is often framed in terms of gender equality—our analysis suggests that the emphasis here is not on achieving equality between women and men; rather, it concerns the broader aim of enabling a wider range of individuals in society to access and share similar life experiences. Drawing on Gullestad's (1992) conceptualisation of "a passion for equality," the quotes from our informants reflect efforts to create equality in contexts previously marked by difference.

7. Helping Others to Produce a New Family Versus Protecting One's Own

As we have seen, there was an overall positive attitude to the legalisation of egg donation, but a different question concerns the personal decision to become a donor. Most of the informants instantly pointed to the importance of helping others, of doing good, some even noting that they would feel guilty and selfish if they already had the children that they wanted and did not help others to achieve the same. During the interviews, however, the women's reflections fluctuated back and forth, and the feeling of a relationship with a potential child emerged as a decisive issue.

Berit, aged 30, was a married mother of one child and was expecting twins at the time of the interview. When asked about the possibility of registering as an egg donor herself, she offered the following reflections:

> I don't think I'd want to be an egg donor myself. Actually, I did think about it when I found out I was having twins. I kind of felt a bit guilty, you know? We tend to see the egg as something kind of mysterious, and suddenly I was going to have not just one baby but two, while there are others out there who can't have any. That made me start thinking: I have the ability to donate lots of eggs, but I think the reason I don't is because of the emotional side of it—the attachment. For me, it doesn't feel like you're just donating an egg; it feels like you're giving away a child.

Later in the same interview, the interviewer invited Berit to reflect on how she imagined it might feel if she were to donate an egg and the resulting child were to contact her.

> Oh….I'm not sure. I think I would've thought about it [the donation] a lot in the years after. Like, wondering if everything was okay. I'm pretty sure it would've taken up a lot of mental space. I definitely wouldn't have just "put it in a drawer" and then suddenly had a 15- or 18-year-old show up out of nowhere. But the real question is, would I have been able to not get emotionally involved when we finally met? I think that would be really hard. Suddenly, there's a face, a name, a bit of a story. And if the child wasn't doing well, I know I'd feel guilty. My genes….Did I make the right choice? Maybe I shouldn't have donated. It would've brought up a lot of emotions.

In this quote, Berit articulated a sentiment that was shared by many of the women interviewed, that donating an egg would inevitably lead to imagining a child who was conceived from her genetic material, for whom she might feel concern. In this sense, she would experience a sense of responsibility for a child born from her egg cell, without having the opportunity to care for or ensure the child's well-being. The possibility that this child might later seek contact brings this perceived responsibility into sharper focus. Most of the women said that, to them, a donation would include more than a cell, and some explicitly stated that an egg is nearly a child, which would make them feel responsible for the potential child's future and welfare (see also Kristensen & Lie, 2023).

Mina, who was 25 years old and had no children, instantly replied very positively to the question of being a donor. She felt that this would help involuntarily childless persons:

> No problem! I'd be happy to do it! It's really about the pain people go through when they can't have children. It might sound selfish, but I think it would feel good to have helped someone in such a vulnerable situation. And of course, I'd be open to contact. Personally, though, I think I'd want to keep a bit of distance—a healthy kind of distance. Like, "It's totally fine if we meet and you know who I am, but I wouldn't see myself as your mother or part of your family…"

Still, later in the interview, she returned to this topic and reflected on her feelings associated with any children who may have resulted from her donated eggs.

> To me, it would be strange knowing that there was someone out there that was part of me that I actually had no contact with, and I think that to a large extent, I would be thinking a lot about "Are they okay? Are they doing well? What are they up to?"

Although Mina expressed an expected intention to maintain emotional distance, it is clear that she was not entirely convinced that she would be able to do so if she were to become an egg donor. When reflecting on the prospect of having children of her own, the tension between perceived selfishness and the desire to do good resurfaced:

> What matters most to me is first knowing whether I can have children of my own. I want to be sure, first of all, that everything's okay—that I have good eggs, so in theory, I could donate them. But if I'm being honest and thinking a bit selfishly, I'd really just like to know that I have some good eggs for myself, to be able to have my own children.

Reflecting on the question of being an egg donor, one's own family became a vital matter. Mina wanted to ensure that she would be able to have her own children and felt that her own family must come first.

Siri, who was 31 and had two children, shared a sentiment that was similar to most of the others, being generally positive about the legal access to egg donation but reflecting on what it would mean for herself and her family if she were to volunteer as a donor:

> I realise that there has been a lawful decision [on egg donation] and I think it is good for those who do not have the possibility, who are perhaps struggling to have children. But still, if it were me, if I were to donate, I do not quite know how—I mean, in some way it would become kin, if you know what I mean. Suddenly, you might have many of your own kin, and you would not know who they were….And then, there is the question of my own children having siblings, and they would not know who their siblings were.

A donation affects not only the donors' relationship with potential children but also their family members, on whose behalf they are also making the decision. The women wondered what their partner would think, and some of them said that he or she would probably respect their decision, but for most of them, it was a question that had not yet become relevant.

Whilst Siri saw egg donation as creating a kind of kinship and interfering with her family in a problematic way, Eli imagined new possibilities for family structures. Aged 26 and without children, Eli was asked about the possibility of her potentially donated egg resulting in a child. She replied that this was the most exciting aspect of egg donation:

> I think it is good that the traditional "A4" family model is being challenged, and that people are exploring new ways of creating and being a family. It shows that family is a dynamic concept—one that thankfully allows for more possibilities. It can be more like a project, something you figure out based on your own needs and wishes, and through dialogue with those who are, in principle, the parents and responsible for the child—and even with the child, if they are aware of it. Maybe I would have felt like a godmother or a godparent, or something along those lines. I think I would have wondered about the child anyway, thought about them before they turned 15—where they were, how they were doing, all of that.

Although the traditional family served as the primary frame of reference for most of the women interviewed, some of their responses—such as Eli's—explored how emerging reproductive possibilities might enable the formation of new and alternative family structures. Eli envisioned a familial relationship with a potential child that would extend beyond conventional norms, imagining it as part of a redefined concept of family. Her reflections highlight a tension that was present in several of the interviews: On the one hand, many of the women regarded the nuclear family—comprising parents and children—as a self-evident ideal; on the other hand, they acknowledged the transformative potential of egg donation in enabling single women and same-sex couples to pursue parenthood and imagining alternative relationships. In this sense, the family continued to be largely perceived as private and defined. At the same time, the women's reluctance to donate eggs may also be interpreted as a reflection of the perceived fragility of the family; it can be challenged by relationships that do not easily conform to familiar patterns but that simultaneously embody deeply familiar ties—namely, those of biological kinship.

8. Concluding Reflections

The women we interviewed expressed strong and explicit support for the recent legal reform that permitted access to egg donation in Norway. Their support was grounded in the value of enabling other women and couples to have children and thereby form families—an outcome that was consistently framed as both meaningful and positive. This discourse on egg donation is in line with the arguments that were put forward in political debates leading up to the enactment of the new Biotechnology Act, as well as formulations embedded in the legislation itself, whereby assisting infertile couples to have children was often framed as most important (Stuvøy, 2024; Stuvøy et al., 2021). This suggests that the law and its underlying rationale are firmly grounded in broadly shared Norwegian cultural norms and values—particularly a culturally naturalised view of the desire for children (Ravn, 2017) and a strong orientation towards the family (Gullestad, 1992, 1984/2001). The fact that several of the participants themselves led lives that might not be described as traditional or family-oriented can, in this context, be interpreted as an indication that prevailing norms remain powerful—stronger, in fact, than the potential challenges posed by individual choices and personal life trajectories.

At the same time, the recent legalisation of egg donation in Norway—which grants single women and same-sex couples access to the technology—may be seen as indicative of a broader societal shift towards the acceptance of diverse family forms, a development that received broad support among the women that we interviewed. In this context, egg donation enables new avenues for family formation, thereby producing a tension between the cultural ideal of the nuclear family—characterised by a close alignment of genetic and social kinship—and the growing recognition of alternative family structures, in which relational configurations and dynamics may be more fluid and complex.

Moreover, the women appeared to take for granted that supporting women and couples who are involuntarily childless falls within the responsibilities of the welfare state and constitutes an integral part of the public healthcare system. When it comes to egg donation, however, the participants clearly framed it as a matter of personal choice. When asked about their partner's perspective, most respondents indicated that this had not been a topic of discussion. However, they generally trusted that the partner would support their personal decision. Moreover, there was a concern among the women that donation might affect the possibility of having their own children and that it would be better to have those first. The question of egg donation, therefore, involves reflections regarding their present or potential family in the time to come. Notably, several of the women nonetheless articulated the view that egg donation represents a form of moral obligation, suggesting that women who meet the eligibility criteria in terms of age and health should ideally volunteer to donate eggs in order to help fulfil other women's and couples' unquestioned desire to have a child.

In addition to enabling the formation of families with children, egg donation was also framed as a means of promoting equality, particularly in contexts where various forms of diversity might otherwise lead to inequality. This reflects a culturally specific conception of equality in Norway, where equality is often equated with sameness—that is, to be equal is to have or be the same (Døving, 2020; Gullestad, 1992). Consequently, it was considered fair that everyone should have the opportunity to have children, regardless of differences in economic or social status, biomedical conditions, or sexual orientation. Equal access to what is perceived as "equal lives"—including children, family, and a stable home—was presented as an ideal that these young women either already possessed or envisioned as part of their future. Whilst this notion

may be interpreted as a form of social inclusion, it is more commonly understood within the framework of the Nordic social democratic tradition, which emphasises conformity. This was evident in a few dissenting voices that instead upheld the ideal that egg donation might contribute to greater diversity in family forms.

Although volunteering as an egg donor was often articulated as a moral obligation to help others, this perspective was frequently counterbalanced by other cultural values, particularly those emphasising the privacy of the family and the intimate connection between kinship and care. The prospect of a donor-conceived child potentially appearing 15 years later was generally perceived as both intriguing and unsettling. Such a child would resist easy classification within conventional kin/non-kin categories, and was sometimes portrayed as representing an intrusion into the private sphere of the family.

Biologically, however, the child would be kin, as the women themselves acknowledged—They would have contributed half of the child's genetic material. This biological relatedness implies a latent obligation of care, which the donor would be structurally unable to fulfil during the child's formative years and would perhaps never be able to. This generated emotional dilemmas and ethical concerns, particularly in relation to caring for oneself and one's own existing or future family. Thus, care for involuntarily childless individuals may come into conflict with the imperative of self-care and care for one's own kin. Given the very low number of egg donors in Norway, and the fact that only a small proportion of our informants expressed a willingness to donate even in a hypothetical and non-binding context, it appears that caring for oneself and one's own family tends to take precedence. Although egg donation and other forms of reproductive technology open up new possibilities for family-making, the findings suggest that the nuclear family and traditional family forms continue to hold a strong normative position in Norwegian society.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Disclosure of LLMs

Earlier drafts of the manuscript were linguistically refined using Microsoft Copilot, an AI-powered language model based on OpenAI's GPT architecture. The tool was employed exclusively for language-related suggestions, including grammar, syntax, and phrasing. All AI-assisted edits were carefully reviewed and approved by the authors. The final version of the manuscript underwent professional language editing by a human proofreader.

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