

“The feeling that’s always there”: Prevalence and Correlates of Parental Guilt in Italy¹

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Abstract

Objective: This article examines the prevalence and correlates of parental guilt and shame in Italy, including anticipated parental guilt among childless individuals.

Background: Parental guilt and shame arise when parents perceive a mismatch between internalized norms of good parenting and their actual parenting practices. While these emotions have been documented in other societies, empirical evidence in Italy remains limited, largely qualitative, and focused on mothers. This study addresses this gap by providing national-level evidence on both mothers and fathers and by extending the analysis to anticipated parental guilt.

Method: The study draws on an original online survey of 6,000 adults of childbearing age living in Italy, with a sampling design that deliberately oversampled mothers (3,500 mothers, 1,000 childless women, 1,000 fathers, and 500 childless men), with a final analytical sample of 5,587. The survey includes items measuring different forms of parental guilt and shame, as well as anticipated guilt. Exploratory Factor Analysis was used to construct five guilt scales, which were subsequently analyzed using OLS regression models.

Results: Parental guilt and shame are similarly prevalent among Italian mothers and fathers, with mothers displaying a modestly higher level of these emotions. No gender differences emerge in anticipated parental guilt. However, the correlates of guilt vary by gender, with economic well-being and gender-role attitudes emerging as the strongest and most consistent correlates across nearly all forms of guilt.

Conclusion: Parental guilt emerges as a salient emotional dimension in Italy not only among mothers and fathers but also among childless individuals, suggesting that moral expectations surrounding parenthood are widely shared in a low-fertility context.

Keywords: parental guilt, parental shame, work-life balance parental guilt, anticipated parental guilt, measurement, Italy.

Introduction

I never feel like I'm doing enough, so I never feel completely free of guilt, especially when it comes to this sense of responsibility, of needing to stay composed, in control. The guilt around not spending enough time with your children or not giving them the time you wish you could, that feeling is always there (N., 35 years old).

The interview² extract above provides an illustrative example of a feeling that many contemporary mothers and fathers have experienced: parental guilt. Parental guilt is defined as self-conscious emotion stemming from the perception of having violated parenting norms or obligations, typically triggered by conflicts between caregiving and other roles (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Borelli et al., 2016; Borelli et al., 2017; Guendouzi, 2006; Uysal Irak et al., 2020). Guilt and the closely related emotion of shame³ have moral implications and fulfill important social functions. While guilt can spur social bonding restoration and foster responsibility (Tangney et al., 2007), it can also have significant negative consequences, such as reduced life satisfaction (Foucreault et al., 2023) and depression (Derella & Milan, 2021). In contrast, shame leads mostly to negative effects, including anger, denial, and withdrawal (Scarnier et al., 2009; Tangney & Dearing, 2003; Taylor & Wallace, 2012; Dunford & Granger, 2017; Liss et al., 2013).

These emotional processes make parental guilt and shame particularly important to study, especially in contexts of persistently low and declining fertility, where the meanings attached to parenthood may shape both experiences and decisions of parents and parents-to-be. It is therefore not surprising that previous research has examined parental guilt and shame using both quantitative and qualitative methods, developing instruments aimed at capturing how these emotions manifest in specific individual circumstances and social contexts. Qualitative research has primarily explored parental guilt and shame through in-depth interviews, examining parents' experiences, triggers, and responses, largely based on convenience samples (e.g., Calarco et al., 2021; Dudley-Marling, 2001; McDonald et al., 2007). In quantitative research, numerous scales have been developed to study parental guilt and shame (among others, Martínez et al., 2011; Borelli et al., 2017; Gonçalves et al., 2018), typically being administered through small- or medium-sized surveys.

² This extract is drawn from a collection of in-depth interviews with mothers and childless women carried out as part of a broader mixed-methods project that also included the survey-based study presented in this article.

³ Guilt occurs when individuals blame themselves for not meeting internalized standards, while shame arises when individuals feel judged by others for failing to meet the specific expectations associated with their role (Ausubel, 1955).

While these studies have provided important insights into parental guilt, the literature reveals three major gaps. First, research has paid far less attention to fathers than to mothers, leaving paternal experiences largely understudied. Second, no previous work has examined *anticipated* parental guilt, that is, feelings of guilt experienced by childless individuals when thinking about becoming a parent. Yet, anticipated guilt may contribute to women's uncertainty about having children, particularly considering the high expectations associated with motherhood (Símonardóttir, 2024). Therefore, investigating these emotional expectations can help us understand how the prospect of parenthood is shaped not only by practical considerations but also by internalized cultural norms and emotional expectations. Third, empirical evidence for the Italian context remains scarce, as existing studies are limited in number and predominantly qualitative. With its low fertility rates (Eurostat, 2025) and well-documented difficulties in reconciling work and family life (Ferragina & Magalini, 2023; Brilli et al., 2016), Italy offers a particularly revealing context for examining the emotional consequences of parenthood.

To address these gaps, we administered an online survey to 6,000 parents and childless respondents living in Italy, fielding two batteries gauging (i) parental guilt and shame and (ii) anticipated parental guilt. To our knowledge, this represents the first attempt to measure parental guilt and shame on such a large-scale sample in this country. Applying Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), we constructed five distinct scales: a) *Generalized Parental Guilt*, b) *Parental Shame*, c) *Work-Family Balance Guilt*, d) *Anticipated Parental Guilt* and e) *Anticipated Work-Family Guilt*. These scales underpin the subsequent empirical analyses, allowing us to quantify the prevalence and the demographic, socioeconomic, and value-driven correlates of parental guilt, shame and anticipated parental guilt in Italy.

Three main findings emerge. First, parental guilt and shame are widespread and affect both mothers and fathers, with mothers reporting only modestly higher levels than fathers, in line with international evidence (Gonçalves et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2011). Thus, the study provides the first large-scale quantitative confirmation of the presence of paternal guilt in Italy. Second, while overall levels are similar, the correlates of guilt and shame vary by gender, reflecting persistent asymmetries in parenting expectations. Third, anticipated parental guilt is widespread and varies little by gender and sociodemographic characteristics, suggesting a shared cultural imagination of parenthood as a demanding and morally charged role.

Background

Context of the study: Italian society

Through the lens of its traditional past and ambivalent present, Italy represents a critical case for the analysis of parental guilt and shame. The organization of family life is significantly influenced by the welfare state that relies on women for the provision of care within the family, including care for children, elders, and husbands (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). Moreover, the Catholic Church holds a notable influence and has its own role in shaping family organization in Italy by endorsing marriage, childbirth, and gender roles based on the male-breadwinner/female-homemaker model (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022; Vignoli & Salvini, 2014). As a result, family life and parenthood hold considerable sociocultural and symbolic significance in Italian society. At the same time, over the past few decades Italian women have made large gains in the public sphere (EIGE, 2024) and new family practices (including cohabitation, birth out of wedlock, and divorce) have come to co-exists with more traditional ones, significantly depending on individual characteristics such as education (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004), age (Mazzuco et al., 2006), religiosity (Vignoli & Salvini, 2014), and gender attitudes (Lomazzi, 2017). Due to these contrasting characteristics, Italy represents a pristine example of an “incomplete gender revolution” (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Gerson, 2010). Within this framework, parental guilt and shame as well as the anticipation of parental guilt among childless individuals are likely to occur and Italy offers a unique opportunity to examine how various individual characteristics influence the manifestation of parental guilt and shame.

Who experiences parental guilt and shame?

In this section we draw on existing literature to identify the factors most consistently associated with parental guilt and shame. This review serves to guide the selection and interpretation of the predictors included in the empirical analysis, which can be grouped into three domains: demographic position, socioeconomic resources, and values and norms.

Demographic position

Gender is a central dimension in research on parental guilt and shame. Although both mothers and fathers experience these emotions, the literature has focused predominantly on mothers, reflecting their greater involvement in caregiving. Research has shown that guilt and shame are common among mothers and has linked them to mental health and negative emotional outcomes (Derella & Milan, 2021; Dunford & Granger, 2017; Law et al., 2021; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010), highlighted the role of societal expectations (Liss et al., 2013),

examined their behavioral consequences (Kim et al., 2023; Slobodin et al., 2020), and explored their relevance to specific parenting practices such as feeding (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2023).

Research on fathers remains more limited, despite evidence that their involvement in childcare is crucial from the earliest stages of parenthood. Studies from Sweden (Wells et al., 2022) and Iceland (Símonardóttir & Arnalds, 2024), for example, found that fathers who felt excluded from perinatal care reported negative experiences, while shared responsiveness between mothers and fathers has been associated with positive developmental outcomes in young children (Lee et al., 2023).

Existing quantitative studies generally find no significant gender differences in overall levels of parental guilt (Gonçalves et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2011). However, they suggest that the sources of guilt differ by gender: fathers' guilt is more often related to work-life balance, whereas mothers' guilt is more closely tied to time spent away from their children (Aarntzen et al., 2021, 2023; Borelli et al., 2016, 2017; Calarco et al., 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2011; Rúðólfssdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). Qualitative studies similarly indicate that guilt is more frequently articulated by mothers, reflecting gendered expectations regarding caregiving and paid work (Calarco et al., 2021; Dudley-Marling, 2001; Rúðólfssdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). By contrast, gender differences in parental shame remain largely unexplored.

Children's age and number. Parental guilt varies across stages of childhood, reflecting age-specific challenges and expectations. Parents of infants and toddlers, particularly in the postpartum period, often report guilt related to negative emotions, feeding practices, and limited involvement in childcare (Dunford & Granger, 2017; Holcomb, 2017; Law et al., 2021; Murray & Finn, 2012; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010; Williams et al., 2012, 2013), whereas parents of older children may experience guilt associated with academic difficulties or children's mental and physical well-being (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Jackson & Mannix, 2004; McDonald et al., 2007). Evidence on the role of the number of children is limited and inconclusive, with existing studies finding no clear association between parity and parental guilt (Shaw & Burns, 1993).

Parents' age may shape experiences of parental guilt and shame through differences in resources, life experience, and social vulnerability. Becoming a parent at a younger age is often associated with fewer economic resources and less experience in managing demanding situations, and young parents, particularly mothers, have historically been subject to stigma and moral judgment (Owens, 2022).

Socioeconomic resources

Education may shape experiences of parental guilt, shame, and anticipated guilt. Lower education is often associated with greater economic stress, while higher education may increase exposure to intensive parenting expectations (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Both pathways can contribute to parental guilt in different ways. Moreover, lower educational and cultural resources are associated with stronger conformity to traditional family norms (Rosina & Fraboni, 2004), which may reinforce moral expectations surrounding parenting.

Income can also be associated with guilt. According to the Family Stress Model, economic hardship contributes to psychological distress (Masarik & Conger, 2017), potentially increasing parental guilt. Although empirical evidence is limited, existing studies suggest a negative association between economic well-being and parental guilt (Kim et al., 2023) and identify issues derived from financial constraints as a source of guilt among low-income parents (Pescud & Pettigrew, 2014).

Finally, *paid work* is a well-documented correlate of parental guilt, reflecting bidirectional work–family conflict, whereby guilt arises when work interferes with family life and vice versa (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Gonçalves et al., 2018; Uysal Irak et al., 2020). Moreover, empirical studies show higher levels of work-related guilt among parents working longer hours, particularly mothers (Borelli et al., 2017; Aarntzen et al., 2021).

Values and norms

Beliefs about *gender roles* shape experiences of parental guilt and shame in gender-specific ways. Evidence suggests that women who engage in more egalitarian parenting report lower levels of guilt, whereas men report higher guilt under similar conditions (Martínez et al., 2011). Moreover, mothers with more traditional gender-role expectations appear more susceptible to guilt, likely due to greater sensitivity to normative pressures, while comparable effects are weaker among fathers (Aarntzen et al., 2023).

Religiosity has received little attention in previous research on parental guilt and virtually none regarding parental shame. In the Italian context, where the Catholic Church continues to exert cultural influence, religiosity may play a role by reinforcing the moral and spiritual dimensions of parenting, thereby shaping experiences of parental guilt, shame, and anticipated guilt among both women and men.

Regional differences within Italy may also shape experiences of parental guilt and shame. The uneven trajectories of modernization between Southern and Northern Italy have long been

associated with distinct family norms and practices, with the South generally characterized by more traditional gender and family arrangements. These differences are reflected in family behaviors, as women in Southern Italy tend to marry earlier, have more children, and are less likely to remain employed after childbirth, particularly among the lower educated, compared to women in the North (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). Such contextual differences suggest that parental guilt, shame, and anticipated guilt may vary systematically across regions.

Methodology

The Parental Guilt and Shame battery

Interested in capturing the multidimensional nature of parental guilt and shame, we administered our *Parental Guilt and Shame* (PGS) battery. For its development, we relied on existing literature on parental guilt, as well as previously validated measures, including items from the Guilt About Parenting Scale (Haslam et al., 2020), the Parenting Guilt Scale (Kim et al., 2023), the Scale of Feelings of Guilt about Parenting (Martínez et al., 2011), and the Work–Family Guilt Scale (Gonçalves et al., 2018). In selecting the items, we aimed to ensure broad coverage of common guilt triggers, enabling us to identify the most salient sources of parental guilt within the Italian context.⁴

For each item, respondents were asked to reply on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The wording of the question as well as the complete item list is presented in Table 1, while the distribution of each item by gender is presented in Table 3, including the number of missing cases for each item. The items are numbered for conceptual clarity but were presented to respondents in randomized order to reduce potential order effects.

The first ten items address generalized guilt⁵. Seagram and Daniluk (2002) pointed out that mothers feel responsible for children’s behavior and personality and feel guilty when things go wrong. Similarly, mothers of children who suffer from health and mental issues or abuse tend to blame themselves and feel guilty for not having prevented these outcomes (Jackson &

⁴ The selection of the items was carried out by two team members with expertise in sociology and economics of the family. The selection was later reviewed in collaboration with two colleagues experienced in collecting and managing measurements and large datasets. Two of the authors of the article have been involved in the collection of data for large scale surveys (the most prominent being the European Social Survey and European Values Study) and thus have extensive experience in the field of survey methods including question development, questionnaire quality and translation. More details on individual items and their sources are available in the Appendix.

⁵ We intentionally excluded statements referring to situations specific to very young children, such as breastfeeding or weaning practices, in order to capture forms of guilt that may arise among parents regardless of their children’s age.

Mannix, 2004; McDonald et al., 2007). These aspects were addressed in our battery by bringing into focus parents' guilt over child(ren)'s problematic behavior (item 1) as well as guilt from feeling responsible for harm (item 2). Previous research also shows that mothers often experience guilt when seeking support with childcare (Calarco et al., 2021; Dunford & Granger, 2017), an aspect captured by item 3. Additionally, as the responsibility of parents extends to feeding practices and food preparation (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2023), we included an item reflecting the remorse over derailing from the optimal or usual feeding practice (item 4).

As previous research shows that regretting or being challenged by the experience of parenthood is common among parents (Dunford & Granger, 2017; Law et al., 2021; Murray & Finn, 2012; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010), we use statements that capture parents' feeling of unconformity in relation to experiencing negative emotions (item 5) and emotional management issues in interaction with their children (item 6). We also explore guilt caused by parents' self-comparison with a more ideal motherhood/fatherhood image (Liss et al., 2013) in item 7.

Guilt can also emerge in particular circumstances, often prompted by situational challenges. For instance, parents experiencing financial difficulties may feel guilty about not being able to provide optimal living conditions and developmental opportunities for their children (Kim et al., 2023; Pescud & Pettigrew, 2014). This aspect is addressed through items 8 and 9. Finally, item 10 gauges guilt that might occur among parents who take time for themselves, which can cause guilt due to societal pressure, especially on mothers (Miller & Strachan, 2020).

Table 1. Parental Guilt and Shame Battery

Question: *Parents often feel inadequacy or doubts in relation to childrearing. Below you will find statements describing some of these feelings. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements*

No.	Items
1	I feel that it is my fault when my child misbehaves
2	I blame myself when something bad happens to my child
3	I feel bad when I am unable to take care of my child myself
4	I feel that I am a bad mother / father when I do not prepare a homecooked meal for my child or when I give my child fast-food
5	I get worried when I am experiencing unpleasant thoughts in relation to motherhood / fatherhood such as regret, boredom, and despair
6	I feel that I am a bad mother/father when I lose my patience or get angry at my child
7	I worry that I am not a good enough mother / father
8	I feel guilty when I do not earn enough money to support my child

9	I worry that I am not exposing my child to enough educational and recreational activities
10	I feel guilty when I take time for myself, go out with friends, or engage in my hobbies
11	I want to sink into the floor and disappear when my child does not behave appropriately
12	I feel ashamed/judged when I get angry at my child in public
13	I feel that I am constantly behind with work because of my child
14	I feel guilty because my career suffers due to my responsibilities as a mother / father
15	I feel guilty when my child gets sick, and I must go to work
16	I worry I am not spending enough time with my child because of work

Parental guilt and shame are two related but distinct emotional manifestations (Niedenthal et al., 1994; Orth et al., 2006; Scarnier et al., 2009). While parental guilt is triggered by parents' self-blame for not meeting their own internalized expectations, parental shame occurs when parents feel judged by "a critical observer", whether real or imagined (Scarnier et al., 2009). Aided by the State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS) (Marschall et al., 1994), we included two items to capture parental shame, the first in relation to a child's wrongdoing in public, thus capturing the effect of the observer (item 11) and the second in relation to a parent's negative reaction towards their child in public (item 12).

Finally, since previous literature has found that paid work is a major source of guilt among mothers and fathers (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Gonçalves et al., 2018; Korabik, 2015; Uysal Irak et al., 2020), we include four items referring to both work-family guilt (work interfering with family) and family-work guilt (family interfering with work) that were administered only to respondents who were in paid work at the time of the interview. The family-work guilt items refer to falling behind with work and career damage due to childcare responsibilities (items 13 and 14), while the work-family guilt items refer to work-family conflict (item 15) and to the impact of work on time spent with children (item 16).

The Anticipated Parental Guilt battery

The *Anticipated Parental Guilt* battery (APG) represents the first attempt to explore anticipated feelings of guilt among childless individuals. It comprises seven items that correspond to the main types of guilt identified for the *Parental Guilt and Shame* battery, adjusted to reflect the anticipated manifestation of this emotion. The wording of the question as well as the item list is presented in Table 2, while their distribution and the number of missing observations is presented in Table 4, separately for women and men.

Table 2. Anticipated Parental Guilt Battery

Question: *Parents often feel inadequacy or doubts in relation to childrearing. Below you will find statements describing some of these feelings. Now, imagine that you were a mother/father and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

If I were a mother/father...

No.	Items
1	I would worry about not being a good enough mother/father
2	I would worry about experiencing unpleasant thoughts in relation to motherhood / fatherhood, such as regret, boredom, and despair
3	I would feel guilty about taking time for myself, going out with friends, or engaging in my hobbies
4	I would worry that I do not have the necessary resources to properly support my child
5	I would feel guilty about not being able to spend enough time with my child because of work
6	I would feel bad if I were constantly behind with work because of my child
7	I would worry that my career might suffer due to the demands of childcare

Data collection and sample

Participants were recruited through an opt-in online panel managed by Ipsos, a commercial survey agency. The use of online panels through survey agencies is a common data collection method and is often considered a second-best alternative to probability-based random sampling (Vehovar et al. 2016). The participants in the Ipsos panel are sourced through a variety of channels, including affiliate and influencer networks, media agencies, social media campaigns, and referral programs, and show important similarity with the overall population in terms of gender, age, employment, macro-areas and parental status. Tables A12 and A13 in the Appendix provide descriptive information on the panel sample and compare the percentage distributions of the quota variables in the population and the sample.

The items were administered in November 2024 within a comprehensive online survey carried out on a sample of 6000 parents and childless respondents, aged 20 to 50 years old living in Italy. Within the overall sample, we prioritized the recruitment of women and mothers, as they were central to the study of parental guilt, setting a target of 4500 women and 1500 men (75% and 25% respectively). Of these, we set a sub-target of 3500 mothers and 1000 childless women (78% and 22% respectively) and 1000 fathers and 500 childless men (66% and 33%). These targets do not reflect the actual population distribution of parents and childless respondents in Italy; rather, the design reflects our interest in specific sub-populations. Within

each target, quotas were then applied to ensure that the sample would reasonably resemble the population in terms of its distribution by age, region of residence, education, and employment status. To reach the target sample size, the survey agency contacted 11523 panel members, of whom 52.07% completed the interviews ($n=6000$), while 26.51% were out of target and were excluded at entrance, 13.47% interrupted the interview, 1.82% were dropped due to low quality and 6.13% were non eligible. Starting from the sample of 6000 respondents, 139 respondents were excluded from the study because they did not meet the requirement of having children aged 18 or below at the time of the interview; another 274 were excluded due to missing data on one of the independent variables of interest, that is, level of religiosity. No other independent variable presents missing values. The resulting analytical sample consists of 5587 individuals including 3204 mothers, 966 fathers, 938 childless women and 479 childless men. The actual participation rate considering the deleted cases is 48%.

Independent variables

Following the literature review, we include three groups of independent variables⁶. The demographic variables include age of the respondent (20-30 as reference category, 31-40 and 41-50) and, for parents, the age of the youngest child (0-2 years old as reference category, 3-5, 6-10, 11-14 and 15-18) and the number of children in the household (one as reference, two, three and more). Socioeconomic resources are captured via level of education (less than upper secondary as reference, upper secondary, tertiary), working hours (not employed as reference category, 34 hours per week or less, between 35 and 40 hours, more than 40 hours) and subjective economic well-being (living comfortably on present income as reference category, coping on present income, finding it difficult on present income, finding it very difficult on present income). Finally, three variables capture values. Gender-role attitudes were measured using three items on a 5-point agreement scale concerning gender equality in business, politics, and career priority. Responses were summed into an index and recoded into three categories: egalitarian (≤ 4 , reference), neutral (5–8), and non-egalitarian (≥ 9). Religiosity was measured by the question “Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?” ranging from 1 (not religious at all) to 10 (very religious). To account for possible nonlinearity, the variable was recoded into three categories: not religious at all (1 to 3, reference category), somewhat religious (4 to 7) and very religious (8 to 10). Lastly, we

⁶ Additional exploratory analyses (not reported) included country of birth and marital status. These variables were not statistically significant and their inclusion did not alter the results of the main analyses.

included regions of Italy due to the differences in the level of modernization and cultural norms (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022). North is used as reference as opposed to Center and South-Islands. The summary statistics of the sample are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Analytical strategy

The data analysis proceeds through several steps. First, we present descriptive statistics for the items of the PGS and APG batteries. Second, we conducted Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization to identify latent dimensions of guilt⁷ and construct distinct scales representing different types of guilt, which are then used as dependent variables in regression analyses. Third, we tested for gender differences across all scales using t-test on the pooled sample of women and men. Fourth, we estimated OLS regression models to examine the associations between the three groups of predictors and each guilt scale (standardized with $\mu = 0$, $\sigma = 1$). Models were estimated separately by gender to assess potential gender differences in these relationships. Due to differences in the number of missing values across dependent variables, sample sizes vary between models.

Results

Parental guilt and shame and anticipated parental guilt: Descriptive analysis

As can be seen from Table 3, the distribution of parental guilt varies considerably across the different items. Both mothers and fathers feel more guilty for not being able to take care of the child themselves, not earning enough money to support their child, and not being a good enough parent. In contrast, respondents are less likely to feel guilty about taking time for themselves and for giving their children fast food. Furthermore, parents report higher levels of guilt towards their family than towards their work⁸, as can be seen for the items about having to go to work when their child is sick and not spending enough time with their child due to work.

Interestingly, childless women and men experience a very high level of anticipated guilt (Table 4). This is especially evident when it comes to the inability to provide sufficient financial resources, not spending enough time with children or not being a good enough parent. In contrast, respondents worry less about being behind on work because of the child or because

⁷ For space limitations, below we present the key results of the EFA and refer the reader to Tables A2-A5 in the Appendix for the details of the analyses.

⁸ Items 13–16 of the Parental Guilt Scale contain a relatively high proportion of missing values because they were administered only to employed respondents. These missing values are structural, reflecting the survey design rather than item non-response. Consequently, analyses involving these items are limited to employed respondents and cannot be generalized to the full sample.

their career might suffer due to the demands of childcare. Interestingly, childless respondents generally do not report guilt over dedicating time to themselves.

Table 3. Parental guilt items distribution (%; missing in N). Mothers (N=3204)

#	Item label	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Missing (N)
1	Fault when child misbehaves	6.01	20.94	33.79	27.71	11.55	43
2	Blame for bad things happening to child	4.78	14.46	31.01	30.92	18.83	44
3	Bad not taking care of child myself	3.14	9.66	20.09	42.84	24.27	48
4	Bad giving fast food to child	15.02	31.86	27.16	17.67	8.30	34
5	Unpleasant thoughts about parenting	11.47	16.78	25.96	30.08	15.72	99
6	Bad parent when losing patience	7.84	17.95	24.41	31.18	18.61	29
7	Worry not good enough parent	7.12	12.65	20.91	36.42	22.91	57
8	Guilt for not earning enough for child	6.19	13.81	20.70	33.60	25.69	55
9	Worry about enough activities for child	7.82	23.02	27.55	30.81	10.80	46
10	Guilt for taking time for myself	12.74	30.64	26.62	20.18	9.82	48
11	Shame when child misbehaves	9.11	20.98	25.84	27.96	16.12	96
12	Judged for getting angry in public	8.28	20.57	26.31	29.05	15.80	102
13	Behind at work because of parenting	22.73	34.02	20.37	14.16	8.71	450
14	Guilt when career suffers	20.29	30.63	20.86	17.45	10.77	419
15	Guilt working when child is sick	4.47	13.02	17.71	37.75	27.05	454
16	Not enough with child because of work	7.21	15.31	19.00	35.03	23.45	415

Table 3. Continued. Parental guilt items distribution (%; missing in N). Fathers (N 966)

#	Item label	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Missing (N)
1	Fault when child misbehaves	6.78	20.56	33.09	30.17	9.39	8

Table 3. Continued. Parental guilt items distribution (%; missing in N). Fathers (N 966)

#	Item label	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Missing (N)
2	Blame for bad things happening to child	7.48	16.23	32.98	29.50	13.80	17
3	Bad not taking care of child myself	5.26	8.00	21.26	45.16	20.32	16
4	Bad giving fast food to child	14.63	28.00	28.42	19.16	9.79	16
5	Unpleasant thoughts about parenting	14.71	19.83	31.66	22.71	11.09	28
6	Bad parent when losing patience	10.98	22.28	28.83	27.88	10.03	19
7	Worry not good enough parent	10.23	15.19	24.47	32.17	17.93	18
8	Guilt for not earning enough for child	6.21	14.84	22.95	33.89	22.11	16
9	Worry about enough activities for child	8.44	19.83	27.85	34.39	9.49	18
10	Guilt for taking time for myself	12.88	27.24	31.15	19.85	8.87	19
11	Shame when child misbehaves	14.47	23.90	29.26	21.86	10.50	33
12	Judged for getting angry in public	10.39	24.52	26.66	26.12	12.31	32
13	Behind at work because of parenting	27.37	33.04	19.08	12.54	7.96	49
14	Guilt when career suffers	26.06	31.05	19.11	14.98	8.79	45
15	Guilt working when child is sick	9.10	17.44	24.38	31.85	17.23	43
16	Not enough with child because of work	5.85	10.94	18.96	40.20	24.05	43

Table 4. Anticipated parental guilt items distribution (%; missing in N). Childless women (N=938)

# Item label	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Missing (N)
1 Worry about being good enough parent	2.87	3.86	13.58	35.98	43.71	32
2 Worry about negative thoughts on parenting	7.00	13.55	20.32	31.69	27.44	67
3 Guilt for time on myself or hobbies	17.96	35.14	21.40	15.74	9.76	36
4 Worry about resources for child	1.66	1.99	7.75	30.01	58.58	35
5 Guilt for little time with child	1.34	3.91	14.65	41.50	38.59	44
6 Guilt for being behind at work	6.00	14.38	26.16	34.43	19.03	55
7 Worry about career and childcare	6.19	14.20	27.61	33.79	18.21	65

Table 4. Continued. Anticipated parental guilt items distribution (%; missing in N). Childless men (N=479)

# Item label	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Missing (N)
1 Worry about being good enough parent	2.37	3.23	12.69	39.57	42.15	14
2 Worry about negative thoughts on parenting	4.43	16.19	27.05	31.49	20.84	28
3 Guilt for time on myself or hobbies	9.85	30.41	29.34	19.27	11.13	12
4 Worry about resources for child	1.08	2.37	12.04	30.32	54.19	14
5 Guilt for little time with child	1.31	3.28	11.79	42.79	40.83	21
6 Guilt for being behind at work	6.33	16.16	35.15	27.29	15.07	21
7 Worry about career and childcare	3.98	18.58	27.21	32.08	18.14	27

Exploratory Factor Analysis

Starting from the ten items gauging general parental guilt, Cronbach's alpha equals 0.85, demonstrating a good internal consistency. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy (0.93) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) ($p=0.000$), indicate that the data are excellently suited for EFA and that the correlations between variables are sufficiently large for factor analysis. All guilt items loaded onto a single factor, with loadings ranging from 0.54 to 0.67. Based on this result, we constructed an additive scale named "*Generalized Parental Guilt*" by summing the ten items.

Because of the theoretical difference between guilt and shame, the two items capturing shame were analyzed separately. The Spearman correlation between these two items is 0.43 and Cronbach's alpha is 0.60, reflecting moderate internal consistency. The KMO measure equals 0.5, meaning that the data is at the minimal level of suitability for factor analysis, but BTS is statistically significant ($p=0.000$) indicating the correlations between variables are sufficiently large to justify it. Thus, we constructed a scale of "*Parental Shame*" using the two variables.

For work-life balance guilt, Cronbach's alpha equals 0.68, KMO equals 0.62 indicating a moderate fit of the data for factor analysis and BTS is statistically significant ($p=0.000$). Based on Kaiser criteria and scree plot, the one-factor solution when all the items belong to the same factor is optimal. As follows, we construct an additive scale named "*Work-Life Balance Guilt*".

As for anticipated parental guilt, Cronbach's alpha equals 0.63, the KMO equals 0.70 (indicating a moderate fit) and BTS is statistically significant ($p=0.000$). Two factors can be distinguished: 1) anticipated guilt for not being a good enough parent; 2) anticipated guilt related to the negative impact of parenthood on one's career and other spheres of life. The first factor comprises items 1, 2, 4 and 5 and the resulting additive scale was labelled "*Anticipated parental guilt*" (Cronbach's alpha=0.64). The second factor includes items 3, 6 and 7. We labeled the resulting additive scale "*Anticipated Family-Work Guilt*" (Cronbach's alpha=0.53).

Who experiences parental guilt and shame?

We first proceed to inspect the five dependent variables and test for gender differences in their distribution (histograms by gender are reported in the Appendix). For parents, the three main outcomes display roughly symmetric, bell-shaped patterns (Figure A1). Among the childless, anticipated family-work guilt is similarly bell-shaped, whereas generalized anticipated guilt is more skewed toward higher values (Figure A2). All distributions are quite similar for women

and men, but two-tailed tests conducted on the pooled sample indicate that mothers report significantly higher levels of *Generalized Parental Guilt*, *Parental Shame* and *Work-Life Balance Guilt* ($p=0.000$). These difference persist also in multivariate models with all independent variables. In contrast, no gender differences emerge when it comes to either form of anticipated guilt (Figure A3 in the Appendix)

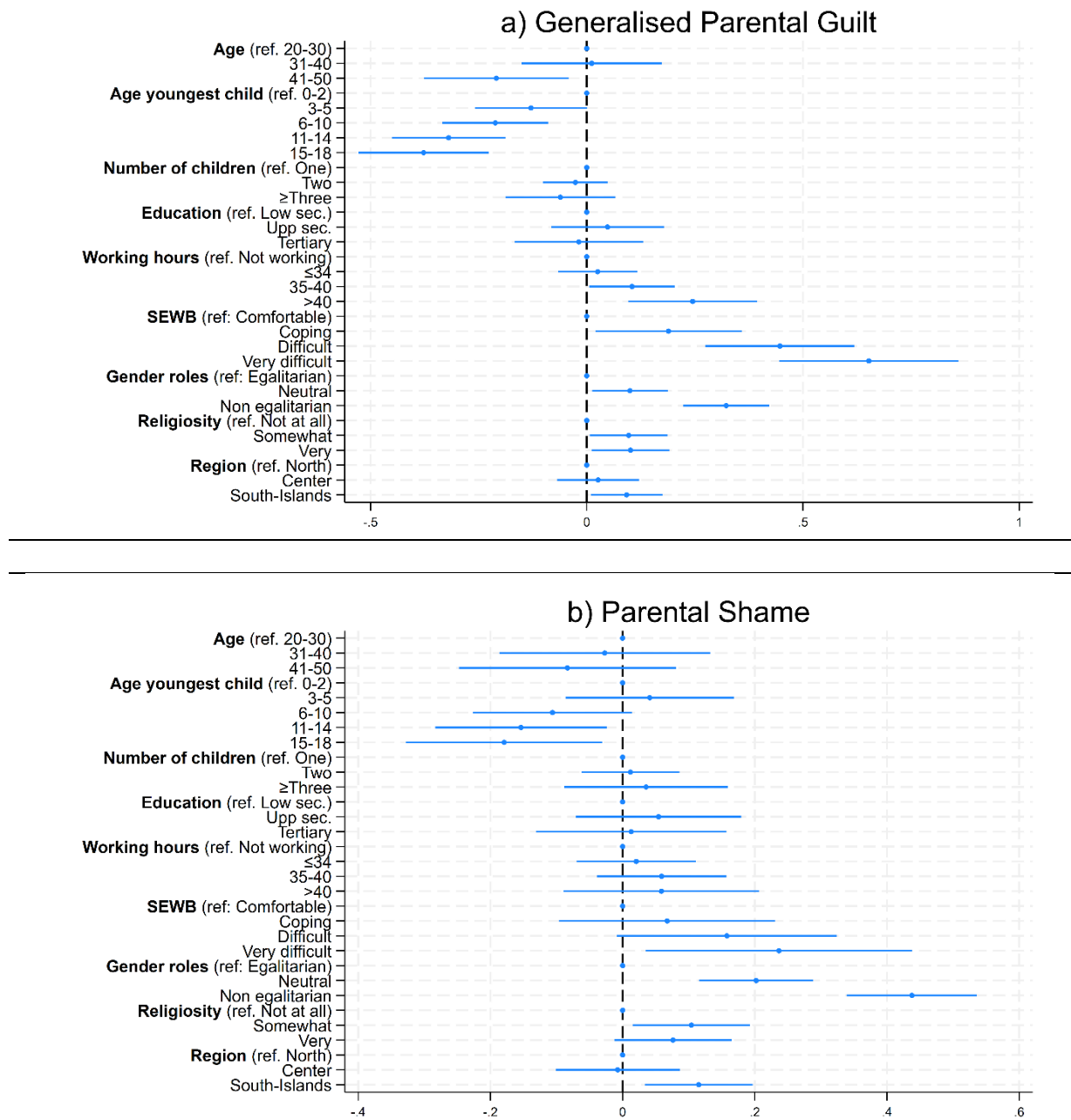
Next, we conduct separate regression analyses for mothers and fathers (Tables A7 to A11 in the Appendix). The resulting coefficients and 95% confidence intervals are all plotted in Figures 1 and 2. Starting from coefficients of the demographic variables, Figure 1 shows that among mothers *Generalized Parental Guilt* is lower among older mothers and among mothers of older children compared to younger ones, whereas the number of children is not associated with this type of parental guilt. The results for *Work-Life Balance Guilt* are mostly identical, while *Parental Shame* is less affected by the age of the children compared to guilt. Concerning socioeconomic resources, mothers' level of education is not associated with *Generalized Parental Guilt* nor *Parental Shame*, but it does appear to be positively associated with *Work-Life Balance Guilt*, as mothers with tertiary education are slightly more likely to experience this form of guilt (although $p>0.05$). Mothers who work long hours experience higher levels of *Generalized Parental Guilt* and *Work-Life Balance Guilt*, but not higher levels of *Parental Shame*, whereas difficulties with living on present income are associated with higher levels of both forms of guilt as well as shame, although the estimates are not always statistically different from zero. Finally, moving to values, we find that mothers with non-egalitarian or neutral gender role attitudes express higher levels of *Generalized Parental Guilt*, *Work-Life Balance Guilt*, and *Parental Shame*, compared to those with egalitarian views; that religious mothers report slightly higher levels of all three dependent variables than non-religious ones; and that mothers in the southern and insular areas experience more guilt and shame compared to those in the north and center.

Turning to fathers (Figure 2), older ones report slightly lower levels of *Generalized Parental Guilt*, but less so for *Work-Life Balance Guilt* or *Parental Shame*. Neither children's age nor number is associated with guilt or shame. With respect to socioeconomic resources, higher education is associated with higher guilt and shame among fathers while hours of paid work show no association with any outcome. Economic hardship, by contrast, is related to guilt, with greater financial difficulty associated with higher *Generalized Parental Guilt* and *Work-Life Balance Guilt*; coefficients for *Parental Shame* are positive but not statistically significant at the 5% level. As for values, fathers with non-egalitarian and neutral gender role attitudes experience higher levels of all three dependent variables compared to those with egalitarian

attitudes while religiosity and region appear less relevant, with the exception of shame that is lower among fathers in the central area of the country.

Overall, for both mothers and fathers, financial strain and traditional gender-role attitudes emerge as the strongest correlates of parental guilt and shame, while children's age is relevant only for mothers.

Figure 1. Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from multivariate linear regression models among mothers predicting a) *Generalized Parental Guilt* (N=2874), b) *Parental Shame* (N=3040) and c) *Work-Life Balance Guilt* (N=1961)



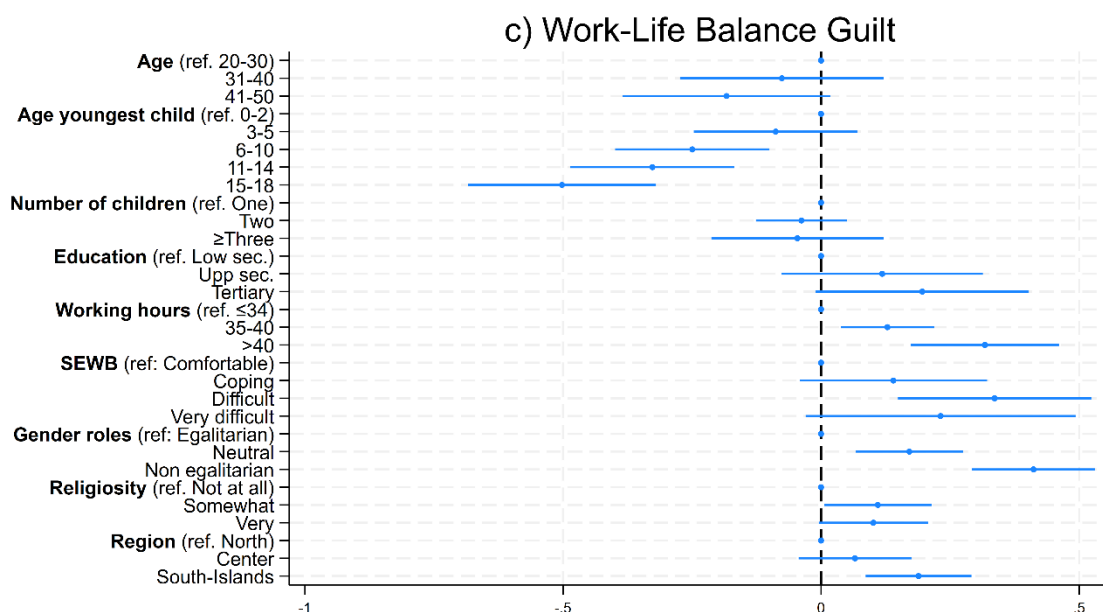
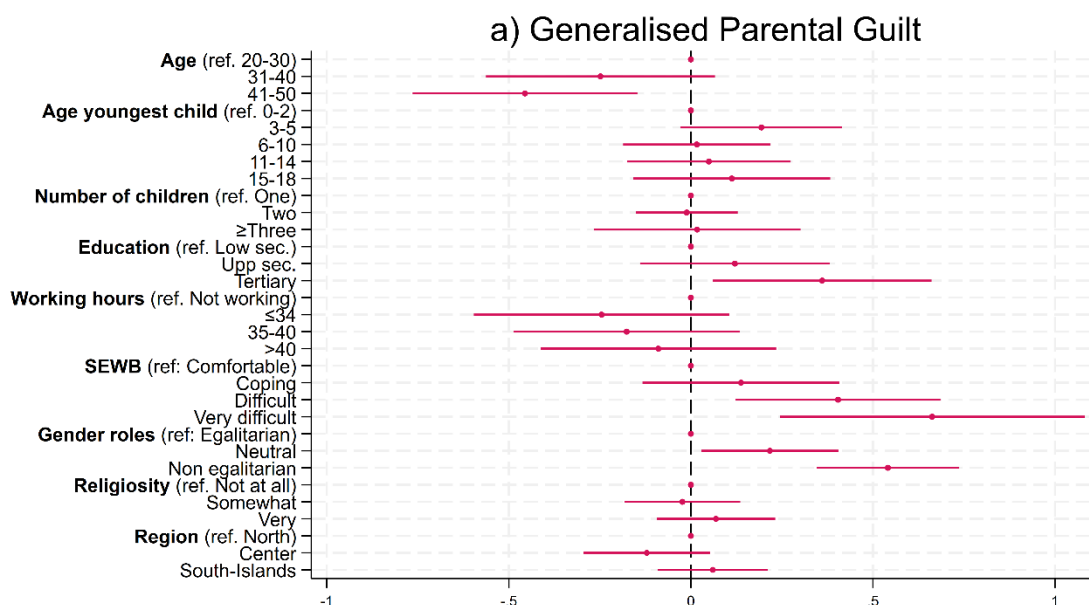
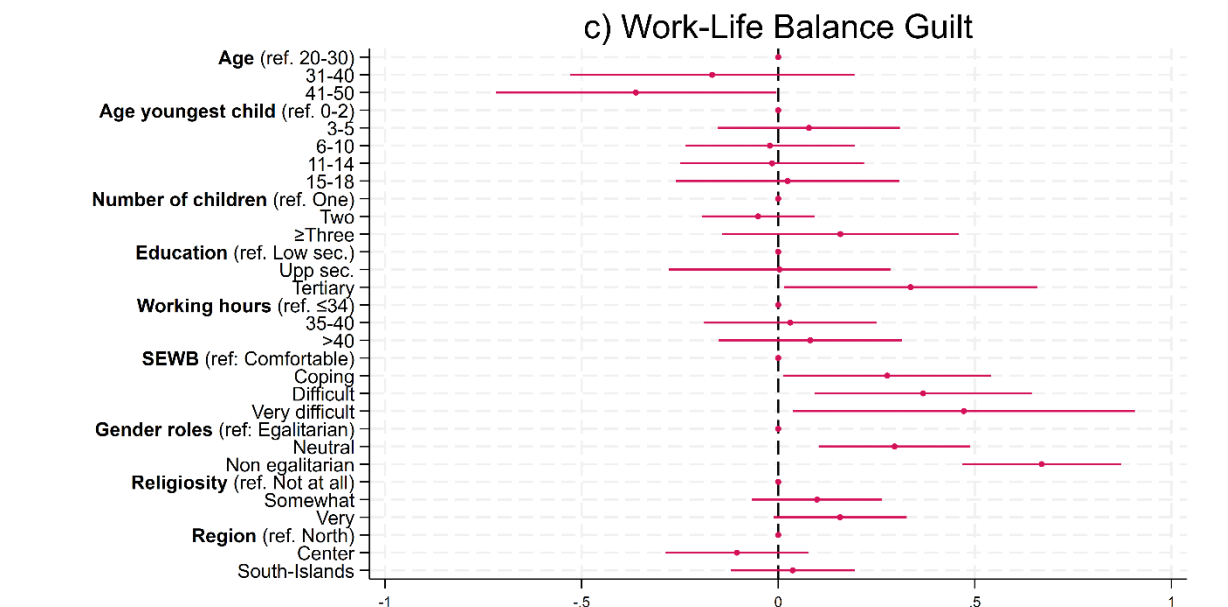
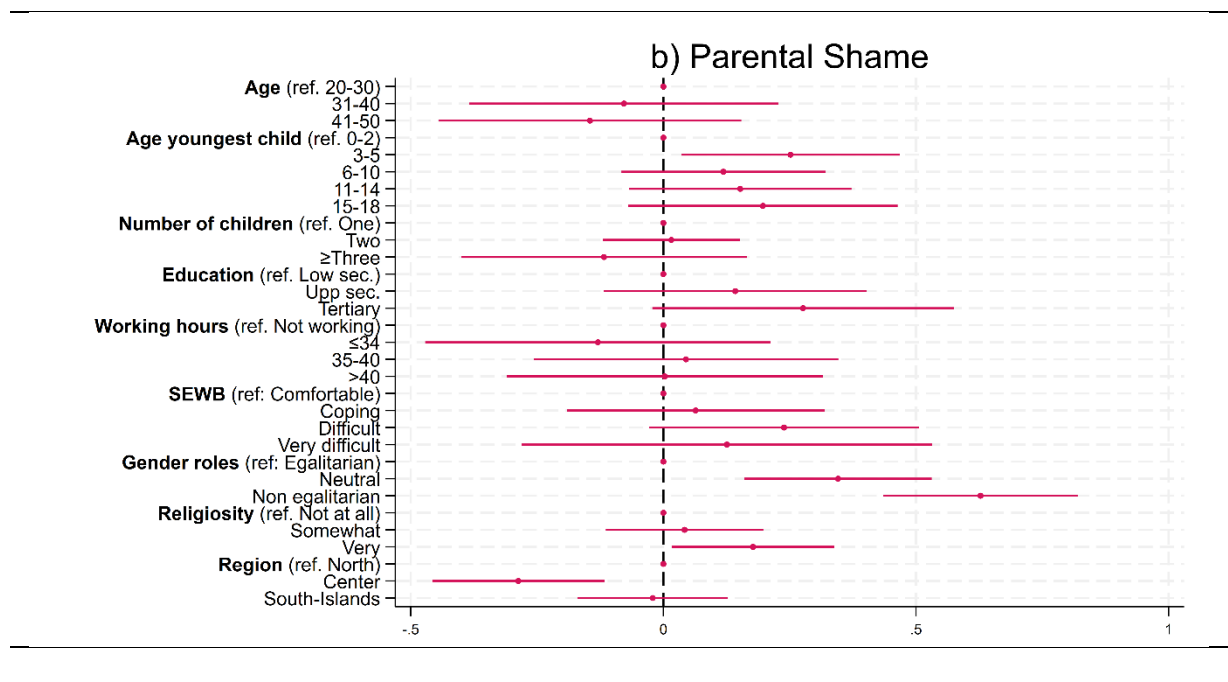


Figure 2. Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from multivariate linear regression models among fathers predicting a) *Generalized Parental Guilt* ($N=862$), b) *Parental Shame* ($N=912$) and c) *Work-Life Balance Guilt* ($N=813$)





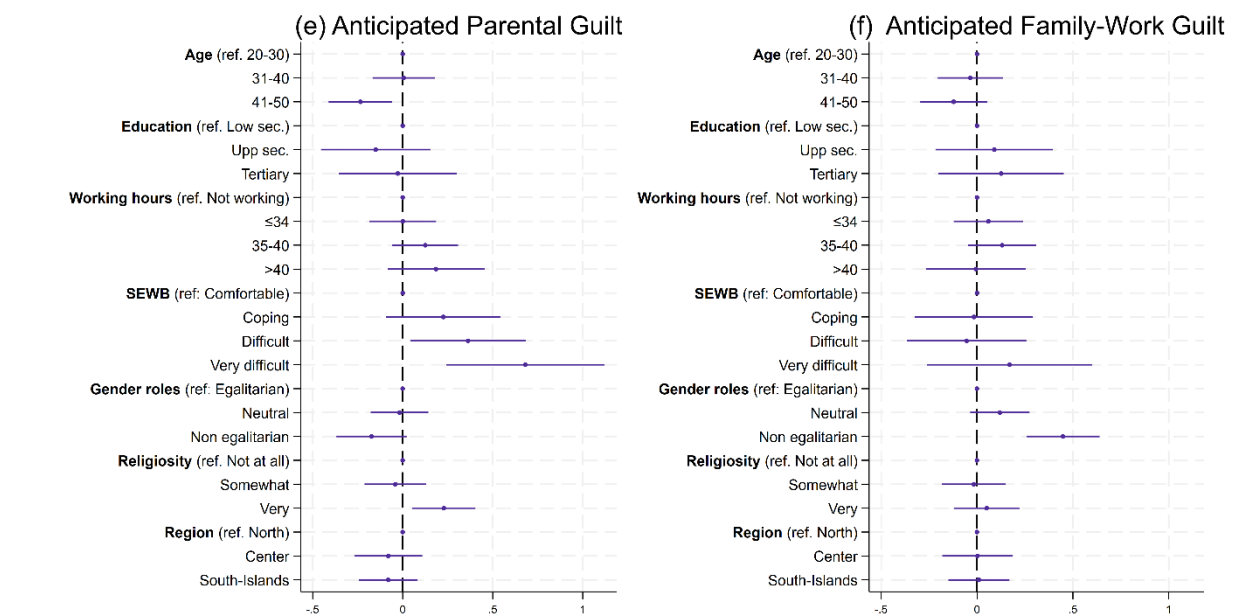
Childless respondents and anticipated parental guilt

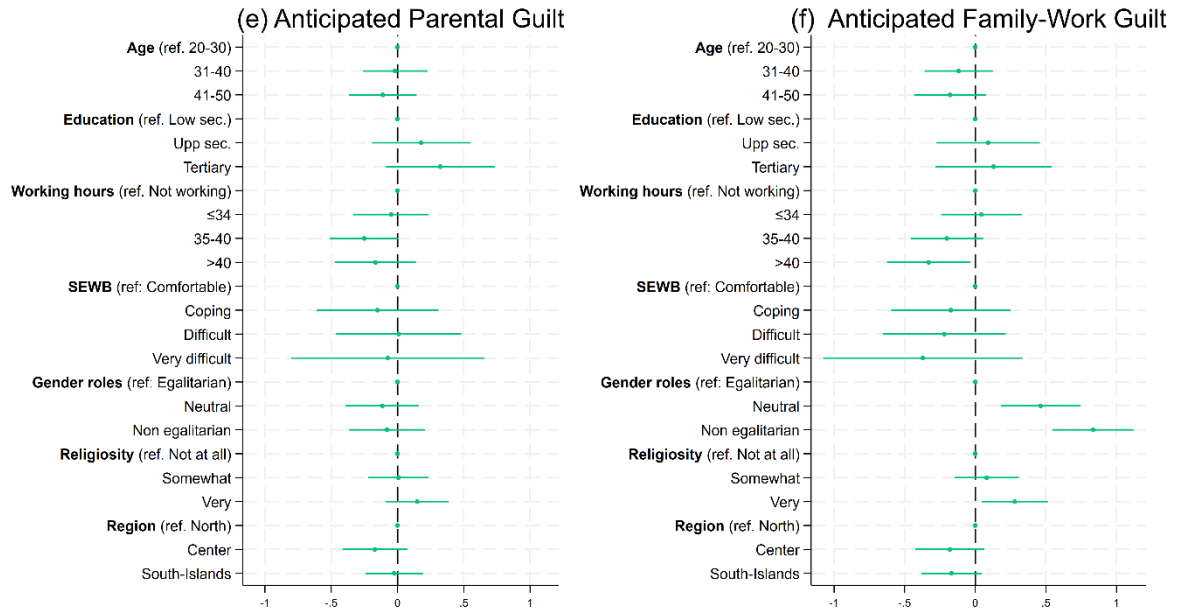
Turning to childless women (Figure 3, upper panels), *Anticipated Parental Guilt* and *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt* show broadly similar patterns across predictors. Age is only weakly associated with *Anticipated Parental Guilt*: women aged 41–50 report slightly lower levels than those aged 20–30, but not all the coefficients are statistically significant at the 5% level. Education and working hours are not strongly related to either type of anticipated guilt, with estimates generally close to zero. By contrast, socioeconomic strain emerges as a key correlate of *Anticipated Parental Guilt*, which increases markedly as subjective economic well-being worsens. No differences emerge, instead, for *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt*. Gender-

role attitudes operate differently across outcomes. *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt* is higher among women with non-egalitarian attitudes compared to egalitarian women, whereas *Anticipated Parental Guilt* is somewhat lower among non-egalitarian women, with $p>0.05$. Religiosity is weakly and positively associated only with *Anticipated Parental Guilt*, while regional differences are small and not statistically significant.

Among childless men (Figure 3, lower panels), neither age nor education are significantly related to either type of guilt. Working hours display a negative, though mostly not statistically significant, association with both outcomes. Estimates for subjective economic well-being are imprecise, with wide confidence intervals that limit substantive interpretation. By contrast, gender-role attitudes emerge as a more robust correlate: *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt* is higher among men with neutral and non-egalitarian attitudes compared to egalitarian ones, while associations with *Anticipated Parental Guilt* are weak. Religiosity shows a modest positive association only with *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt*, whereas no meaningful regional differences are observed.

Figure 3. Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from multivariate linear regression models predicting e) *Anticipated Parental Guilt* and f) *Anticipated Family-Work Guilt* among childless women (upper panels, N=832 and N= 837 respectively) and men (lower panels, N=423 and N=430 respectively).





Discussion and conclusions

The results presented above allow us to draw three main considerations regarding parental guilt in Italy. First, the study confirms the presence of parental guilt and shame among both mothers and fathers, while also showing that mothers report moderately higher levels of these emotions. This finding is novel in the Italian context, where quantitative evidence on mothers' and fathers' experiences of parental guilt and shame has so far been lacking. At the same time, it is consistent with international quantitative research showing relatively small gender differences in levels of parental guilt, with mothers exhibiting only a modest predominance (Gonçalves et al., 2018; Martínez et al., 2011). Combined with evidence that fathers play an important role in child development and family life from the earliest stages of parenthood (Lee et al., 2023; Símonardóttir & Arnalds, 2024; Wells et al., 2022), this finding challenges the tendency to treat parental guilt primarily as a maternal issue. Family policies and support interventions should therefore pay greater attention to fathers' caregiving experiences and the emotional demands associated with them.

Second, while the overall levels of parental guilt are similar, gender differences emerge in the factors associated with guilt: mothers of younger children report higher levels of guilt than mothers of older ones, whereas child age is not significantly associated with fathers' guilt. This is in line with some of the previous literature showing that especially mothers of young children experience intense maternal guilt (Dunford & Granger, 2017; Law et al., 2021; Murray & Finn, 2012; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010). By contrast, fathers' guilt is more strongly associated with their own age, with younger fathers reporting higher levels of guilt, possibly reflecting evolving

norms of involved fatherhood (Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Religiosity also operates differently by gender, with religious mothers reporting higher levels of guilt, possibly reflecting stronger expectations of maternal sacrifice within the context of traditional Italian family norms. Similarly, traditional gender role attitudes are positively associated with guilt, particularly among fathers, suggesting that men who endorse more traditional views may also hold themselves to demanding standards as parents. This finding contrasts with earlier research portraying traditional fathers as relatively insulated from parental guilt, and may point to changing expectations surrounding paternal involvement and responsibility (Aarntzen et al., 2023; Martínez et al., 2011). Differences between mothers and fathers also emerge in relation to work–life balance guilt, with higher education increasing guilt among fathers but not mothers, and stronger effects observed among parents in Southern Italy, particularly mothers, likely reflecting more traditional gendered expectations in this context.

Third, anticipated parental guilt shows no gender differences and is generally high across all groups, exceeding reported levels of experienced guilt. Variations in anticipated guilt are limited, although guilt tends to decline with age and is weakly associated with socio-demographic factors. Traditional gender attitudes are positively linked only to anticipated family–work guilt, while religiosity shows weaker and less consistent effects. Overall, these patterns suggest that anticipated guilt reflects a broadly shared cultural expectation of intensive parenting in Italy, rather than differences between specific social groups. Such anticipated guilt may discourage the transition to parenthood, particularly among women. Indeed, the perception of motherhood as a physically and emotionally demanding experience has been identified as a factor underlying both voluntary childlessness and the prolonged postponement of childbearing (Símonardóttir, 2024).

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although the sample is balanced in terms of key sociodemographic characteristics, it is not probabilistic, as respondents were recruited through an online panel. This may have led to underrepresentation of individuals with limited internet access, lower digital literacy, or higher time constraints, as well as potential self-selection effects linked to interest in the topic or differential availability (Cornesse et al., 2020). Yet, at the same time, online data collection may reduce social desirability bias, which is relevant for sensitive topics such as parental guilt (Berzelak & Vehovar, 2018). However, the direction of potential bias remains unclear, and the observed levels of guilt may therefore be either over- or underestimated. In addition, the intentional oversampling of women and possible selectivity within the male subsample, where fathers who participate may be more involved or more expressive (Costigan & Cox, 2001, Bastais et al.,

2015), may affect the comparability of gender differences. Future research should aim to rely on probabilistic sampling strategies to improve the generalizability of findings. Finally, the single-case, cross-sectional design limits understanding of the contextual and temporal dynamics of guilt and shame; longitudinal and comparative studies would be useful to examine how these emotions emerge, fluctuate, and are managed over the course of parenthood and the extent to which they are shaped by country-specific cultural norms and policy contexts.

To conclude, our contribution offers a robust framework for understanding parental guilt and shame not merely as private experiences, but as socially structured emotional responses with far-reaching implications for family behavior, gender inequality, and public policy. By mapping the emotional costs of parenthood, both real and anticipated, this article deepens our understanding of the burdens many parents carry in their everyday lives and it underscores the urgent need to address the emotional dimensions of parenting through supportive policies and societal change, recognizing guilt and shame not as individual failings but as reflections of broader structural tensions in contemporary Italian family life.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the authors.

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