

'I HATE MY REALITY'



As *Roe v Wade* is overturned and abortion bans are reinstated in the US, women from across the world who felt pressured to have children speak out

Interviews and photographs by Diana Karklin

'Getting pregnant was the worst thing that could have happened to me. Abortion was the first thing that came to my mind' *Mexico, left*

I became pregnant two years after getting married and it was the worst thing that could possibly have happened to me because I was in the middle of separating from my husband. He had tried to hit me and I didn't want to stick around to see if he would do it again.

I never liked children, so I wasn't keen on the idea of having one. Abortion was the first thing that came to my mind, but the only place nearby it was allowed was Mexico City, and only until 12 weeks.

Usually I leave for work at 10am. My mother helps me run the household. She takes care of the house and food, and looks after my little girl all day while I'm at work. I get home at 8pm. Often I have to play with my daughter even if I am exhausted. Around 9-10pm I put her to bed, and watch videos or do nothing - it's my only downtime. When she finally falls asleep, I start doing other work. If I find discount offers in a supermarket, I buy the products and resell them online. You do whatever you can to pay the bills.

Everyone blames me for not sacrificing my own happiness so that my daughter can grow up in a house with her mother and father. They make me feel selfish for putting my own happiness above hers. The problem is ignorance in society. It demonises mothers who want to be women before being mothers, women who want to be happy and not sacrifice everything for their children.

I think that just as I

realised my mother regretted motherhood, my daughter will end up realising the same. I don't want to pretend, but I believe that if I do things right, she will understand. If you give children love, affection and everything possible, and they know it, then, whether or not you regretted having them becomes secondary. Maybe my mother didn't want to have me, but she had me and she loves me, and the rest is history. And yet I still miss my previous life. As much as I wish I had reached a point of acceptance, it is still something I cannot do.

'An unwanted pregnancy doesn't last nine months - it lasts a lifetime' *Spain*

I met the father of my child when I was 17 years old. I ended up in a toxic relationship and was pressured to not use condoms and take the pill instead. It's easy to judge from the outside, but when you're in love with someone you end up taking on all the responsibility.

I got pregnant when I was 18 because my birth control failed, and even though I didn't want to be a mother, I went ahead with it anyway due to emotional blackmail from the father. He accused me of wanting to murder our baby. My mother told me: "In this house we don't get abortions - if needs be, I'll take care of it," and "Now that you've had your bit of fun, you have to deal with the consequences." And I did.

In the beginning I tried to accept it. I wanted to be a good mother and to pretend that it wasn't so bad. I wanted to look older than I was because people judged me a lot for being such a young mother.

Until one day I was honest with myself. I looked in the mirror and told myself: "Who am I trying to fool? I don't want to be a mother." I was pretending to be happy so those around me



didn't label me as a failure, as an idiot with a broken life.

I hate my reality, the life I didn't choose to have. Where is that anti-abortion religious education teacher now? Is she going to take care of my child? My ex said we had to face the consequences, so why doesn't he pay child support? Why do I have to live with the guilt of my mother taking care of her so I can study? It's really hard for me, because an unwanted pregnancy doesn't last nine months - it lasts a lifetime.

A few months ago, social services called me because of my daughter's absences from school. It happens when she's with her father. But it seems that whatever happens, it's my responsibility. They subtly forced me to attend mediation sessions with him, knowing he had abused me psychologically. It was hell. In later sessions, they told me what a bad mother I was, that my education couldn't be the most important thing in my life, that I had to "follow through with my obligations as a woman".

Not long ago, when he came

to pick my daughter up, he physically assaulted me. I went to the doctor and I reported him. The judge hasn't made a decision on the case, although the truth is I don't have much hope. We live in a sexist society.

The bruises will heal in the end, but the psychological abuse lasts much longer. Nowadays I feel calmer and have a better relationship with my daughter. I enjoy her in a different way, looking for common interests such as drawing, playing music that I like for her. It's almost as if she were my sister. The relationship is more fun.

Motherhood generates a lot of contradictions and one of them is this: I love my daughter as a person, but I regret becoming a mother. I know it's difficult to understand. I hate the ideal of the selfless and self-sacrificing mother that society expects of you. You were a person once - but when you become a mother, the whole world thinks they can express their opinions about what you do and treat you like a child.

'Since my kids were born, I feel like I don't have a purpose in life any more. Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going?' *Middle East, below*

I used to work before getting married. I didn't know anything about having children because none of my closest friends had any, but I saw how important it was for my husband, who was approaching 40. Plus, he told me that all his childfree female friends over 40 went into a deep depression about not having had children. I was frightened by this idea and decided that maybe it was OK to try. That's how it started.

I was totally unprepared. I wake up at 6am every day now, even during the holidays. I have 45 minutes to get dressed, attempt to make my children eat something, dress them for school, pack their lunch boxes, brush their teeth, and wash their faces and hands. The bus picks them up and I feel like I have lost half of my daily energy in those 45 minutes. I take care of the household chores, then my husband wakes up and starts his slow and relaxed morning routine.

At 3pm, the bus comes back. Over the last few years, the children coming back from school has meant two hours of incessant crying and screaming. I prepare their dinner. I finally manage to get them to eat and play. Then I make them have a shower, put their pyjamas on, read books, play the same lullaby for the dozenth time, and they fall asleep. Afterwards, I do some work or talk to my husband on

the phone. Then I sleep.

My husband has been travelling a lot for work, meeting with his colleagues, having dinners. He has been living life the same way he did before we had kids, except I don't share it with him any more. I am the one home alone with the kids all the time.

I regret that I didn't agree with my husband in advance about how we would approach parenting. He took it for granted that fathers are not like mothers, and that mothers are the ones who raise the kids. He learned how to change a nappy when the kids were two years old, and has never spent a whole day alone with them in six years. I realise that it's not totally his fault - it's the society in which he was raised. And yet I would like to ask him: "Did you know this would happen to me? Did you know I would be trapped at home with the kids alone all the time? And if you

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I made an effort to get home.

There is nothing stronger than a child's love for their mother; it's a true and innocent love. A mother's love changes depending on the situation, but what I call basic love is always there. My children are in my heart - I love them and everything I do, I do for them. Nevertheless, if I could start over again, I wouldn't have had any of them. The fact that this has become so unbearable is something I couldn't have known before. I want my peace, my space, my life back.

I am angry at myself because I had this crazy idea when I was 12 and was stubborn enough to carry it out. It's a lie that motherhood is the greatest happiness in the world. Why didn't my friends or my grandmother, who weren't enthusiastic about motherhood, warn me? Why didn't anyone take off my rose-tinted spectacles before I became a mother?

'I wasted the years when I was young, and now I don't have time to make my dreams come true' *Israel, above*

Here, a woman who doesn't want to have children is a threat to the social order. The reasoning goes: in order to have a bigger population than the Arabs, you need more Jewish babies. If you aren't a mother, you are betraying your homeland.

I didn't want to do military service, but it's obligatory. So how does one save oneself from the army? By getting married. My husband was very good to me. I had never thought about whether or not I wanted to be a mother - it was automatic. I got pregnant right away. Before my

first child was born, I regretted it. I couldn't put it into words, but I knew it was a mistake.

I feel guilty about my children. It's very difficult because they didn't have what they needed from a mother. Now I do what I can for my grandchildren. I don't enjoy it, but I help them in every way. It's the "job" of many women who take care of their husbands, children and elderly people. Socially, we are predestined to be caretakers.

I have a mediocre relationship with my children; we don't have many things in common. When we see each other, we talk about trivial things, but they never ask me about my past, like where and how I was raised. As the years go by, we drift further and further apart. They have their own families now and are busy with other things.

I'm not afraid of death, but when I see myself in the mirror, I see an old, sick woman and feel sorry for myself. I wasted the years when I was young, and now I don't have time to make my dreams come true.

When my current female partner and I met for the first time, years ago, we fell in love. We wanted to live together, but at that time it was against the law to even be seen out together in Israel and we were too young to challenge that.

One day my mother came to her parents' house and caused a terrible scene because she had found out we were lesbians. After that, my partner and I didn't see each other for a long time. I got married.

Years later, she called me, we finally saw each other and decided to be a couple again. She is the love of my life and I am hers.

knew, why didn't you tell me?"

I love my children, I love my husband, but when I think about my old life I have to admit that it was much more fulfilling and exciting. Since my kids were born, I feel like I don't have a purpose in life any more. Who am I? What am I doing here? Where am I going? My kids have become my absolute priority - their education, their daily needs, their health, their happiness - but what about me? I can't find an answer, so I stopped asking myself what my dreams are.

'If I could start over again, I wouldn't have had any of my children. I want my peace, my space, my life back' *Germany, above*

I grew up in an ultra-religious community. From the beginning, I was told my role in life was to be a mother and wife. People around me had five or six children, so you could say I was predestined to become a mother. I remember once when I was 12, and we were fishing in a lake, I wrote four names in the sand: three boys and one girl. The names have changed, but I always knew I wanted four kids before turning 30.

I now have four boys. I used to like calm, having a tidy house. And what I have is permanent noise and chaos.

Not even 10 minutes go by without them shouting and fighting. Somebody constantly wants something from me. That's how it is every day from the crack of dawn until night, when I'm so tired that I fall into bed. The childcare situation is catastrophic: there are no places available and they close early. If your child is sick more than 20 days a year, you have to ask for unpaid leave.

I'm counting down the years until the youngest turns 18. I haven't had a good night's sleep in 13 years. I just want to be able to sleep eight hours, go to work well rested, come home calmly and watch TV. Now we only watch cartoons.

When my husband turned 28, he took the attitude that, "from now on I'm going to do whatever I feel like because all my life I've suffered from low self-esteem". All of a sudden I had a man I didn't recognise. I stayed at home alone with three children because his work and other interests came first.

One day I couldn't handle it any more. I got in my car and drove down the motorway aimlessly at a high speed. I couldn't stop crying. And in that moment a thought flashed through my mind: "What if I just let go of the wheel?" Then I thought about my children and realised that they weren't going to survive with their father, and



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I lost so much being a parent that I am constantly trying to get back, and the older I get, the harder I find it to reestablish what I lost

I never should have married a man or had children. The right thing would have been to be with my current partner, but we couldn't. It's hard to feel guilty all the time, but that's how I feel: guilty vis-a-vis my mother, my children and my partner.

'My mother had three children by 21. No job, no education, no career. Bored out of her skull. That was not at all what I wanted to do with my life'
US, above and right

Louisiana is a very Catholic society and there is this religiously enforced societal misogyny. My mother didn't finish high school. She got married a month before she turned 17 and had three children by the age of 21. No job, no education, no career. Bored out of her skull. That was not what I wanted to do with my life. To me, having a career, a college education and my freedom was more important. I saw what having children did to women in my family and I didn't want to deal with it.

Then all of a sudden the biological clock started ticking between the ages of 24 and 26. And it overrode my brain. I thought to myself that maybe Mom was right, that I had grown up and now wanted to be a mother. I decided I wanted to have a baby, and that if it hadn't happened by 30, it wasn't going to happen.

I was almost 29 when I met him, and in six months we were married and pregnant. My biological clock must have lowered my IQ temporarily for me to have been willing to deal with someone who was everything I hated in a man, just so I could benefit from his sperm. It wasn't until my daughter was born and I was handed her, with her big blue eyes - my eyes - staring up at me expectantly, that I realised this was a huge mistake.

He didn't want to give up anything. While I was in the hospital after giving birth, I had to call and tell him to come to see his child because he was too busy playing video games. There were many times when

I woke up at six o'clock in the morning and he was nowhere to be found because he was out with his friends. This continued for a long time. After I left him, he started demanding that my new husband adopt her so he wouldn't have to pay child support. We eventually did, just so she wouldn't have to spend time with him. He was able to walk away relatively unscathed - people aren't judging him.

I had to accept that it was a mistake I made - it was never her fault that I didn't enjoy the job of raising her. Sometimes it was sadness, sometimes it was guilt and sometimes it was just being overwhelmed and resentful of my ex-husband's ability to walk away. All these little negative things that I am sure everybody feels, but at the same time not everybody hates that job. Some people were just meant to be parents and I don't think I was one of them.

You stop doing things for yourself because you have to focus on taking care of the baby and you have to work. So everything that is not immediately important just gets pushed to the side until you realise that you are doing nothing for yourself any more.

The question "Would you become a mother again knowing what you know today?" seems like it's an easy yes-or-no thing, and

I've answered no in the past without really thinking about it. But I cannot just go back in time and remember that I hated the role of parent and forget the child I had, or the things I've done that couldn't have happened without that child.

I absolutely love my daughter and we have a wonderful relationship. Someone asked what she thought about me and she said I was her best friend. She knew before I told her that I regretted motherhood, but she thinks I did a really good job at it. She grew up knowing that she was loved and wanted - there is a huge difference between hating being a mother and resenting your child, and having a parent who actually adores you even though they hate doing the job.

And still ... I think you give up a lot more than you get in return. I lost so much being a parent that I am constantly trying to get back, and the older I get, the harder I find it to reestablish what I lost. I get unconditional love from my daughter, but she is going to grow up and move on, and hopefully not give up her life the way I did, because it's really not worth it ●

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This is an edited extract from Diana Karklin's book, Undo Motherhood

