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Care to live

Everyday strategies among
single mothers in Lithuania
Laura Lapinskė

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single mothers in Lithuania
Laura Lapinskė

Subject: Gender Studies
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School of Culture and Education & Baltic and East European Graduate School



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To my mother Liumina,
*who lovingly raised three daughters as a single mother
and always trusted us in our paths,*

and

in loving memory of Martina,
*a free spirit who never stopped dreaming of and fighting
for a better world for her daughters.*

Abstract

This dissertation, *Care to Live*, offers an in-depth ethnographic study of well-educated single mothers navigating everyday life in Kaunas, Lithuania – a post-socialist semi-periphery marked by structural precarity. Through feminist activist ethnography, the author examines how these women develop material, emotional, and social strategies to survive and care within conditions shaped by neoliberalism, insufficient welfare systems, and societal stigma.

The dissertation is grounded in Social Reproduction Theory and feminist critiques of neoliberalism. It highlights how care work – often unpaid and invisibilised – is central to single mothers' lives, constituting both a burden and a potential site of resistance. Lapinskė interrogates how normative ideals of family, motherhood, and success intersect with class, gender, and labour to shape women's lived experiences.

Divided into six main chapters, the dissertation addresses: transformations in post-Soviet Lithuania; the stigma and material hardships faced by single mothers; coping mechanisms including informal support networks of kin, neighbours, and friends; and the redefinition of maternal “failure” as a political critique of neoliberal expectations. Drawing from interviews, diary notes, and observations, Lapinskė documents how these women reclaim agency and community through care practices, solidarity, and creative resilience – often resisting imposed ideals of perfect motherhood, strength and self-sufficiency.

Ultimately, *Care to Live* argues that single motherhood in Lithuania must be understood not as individual deficiency but as a site where systemic inequalities – especially gendered and classed precarities – manifest and are resisted. The work contributes to feminist ethnography, post-socialist studies, and care politics by centring the voices and strategies of women at the margins of dominant narratives.

Keywords: single motherhood, precarity, post-socialism, Lithuania, neoliberalism, feminist ethnography, social reproduction, care, everyday life, failure, resistance.

Abstract (sv)

Omsorg om livet: vardagsstrategier bland ensamstående mödrar i Litauen

Denna avhandling *Omsorg om livet* är en djupgående etnografisk studie om vardagslivet bland välutbildade, ensamstående mödrar bosatta i Kaunas, Litauen – en postsocialistisk semiperiferi präglad av strukturella orättvisor. Med utgångspunkt i metoden feministisk aktivistisk etnografi undersöker Lapinskė hur dessa kvinnor utvecklar materiella, känslomässiga och sociala strategier för att hantera vardagen och ta hand om varandra i ett samhälle präglad av nyliberalism, otillräckliga välfärdssystem och social stigmatisering.

Avhandlingen bygger på teorier om social reproduktion och på feministisk kritik av nyliberalismen. Den lyfter fram hur det – ofta obetalda och osynliggjorda – omsorgsarbetet är centralt i ensamstående mödrars liv, och hur det kan förstås såväl som en börda som en potentiell motståndspraktik. Lapinskė undersöker hur kvinnors levda erfarenheter formas i skärningspunkten mellan klass, kön, arbete och normativa ideal kopplade till familj, moderskap och framgång.

Avhandlingen är uppdelad i sex huvudkapitel som tar upp: omvandlingsprocesser i det postsovjjetiska Litauen; den stigmatisering och de ekonomiska svårigheter som ensamstående mödrar möter; deras strategier som inkluderar informella stödnätverk bestående av släktingar, grannar och vänner; samt hur ett ”misslyckat” moderskap kan omdefinieras som en politisk kritik av nyliberala förväntningar. Med utgångspunkt i intervjuer, dagboksanteckningar och observationer visar Lapinskė hur dessa kvinnor återerövrar agens och samhörighet genom omsorgspraktiker, solidaritet och kreativt motstånd vilket utmanar påtvingade idealbilder av den perfekta modern som stark och oberoende.

Sammantaget argumenterar *Care to Live* för att ensamstående moderskap i Litauen inte bör förstås som ett individuellt misslyckande utan som ett synliggörande och en kritik av systemiska ojämlikheter, särskilt köns- och klassrelaterad prekaritet. Genom att lyfta fram röster och strategier från kvinnor som annars befinner sig i utkanten av dominerande narrativ bidrar avhandlingen till områden som feministisk etnografi, postsocialistiska studier och omsorgspolitik.

Nyckelord: ensamstående mödrar, prekaritet, postsocialism, Litauen, nyliberalism, feministisk etnografi, social reproduktion, omsorg, vardagsliv, misslyckande, motstånd.

Santrauka

Ši daktaro disertacija remiasi etnografiniu tyrimu apie išsilavinusias vienišas mamas Kaune, Lietuvoje, ir jų kasdienės patirtis auginant vaikus. Disertacijoje nagrinėjamas posocialistinis kontekstas, kuriam būdingas struktūrinis nestabilumas ir nuolatinė neužtikrintumo būseną. Remdamasi feministine aktyvistine etnografija autorė tiria, kaip vienišos mamos naviguoja per sudėtingą kasdienybę, kūrybingai pasitelkdamos įvairias išgyvenimo strategijas, padedančias nepasiduoti ir toliau rūpintis savimi bei savo vaikais. Disertacijoje atskleidžiama, kaip vienišų mamų kasdienį gyvenimą neigiamai veikia neoliberalizmo ideologija, nestabilios socialinės apsaugos struktūros bei vis dar gajai socialinė stigma.

Disertacijoje, kuri grindžiama socialinės reprodukcijos teorija ir feministine neoliberalizmo kritika, pabrėžiama, kad neapmokamas ir dažnai nematomas globos ir rūpesčio darbas yra centrinė ašis vienišų mamų gyvenime, tačiau tai ne tik našta, bet ir potenciali plotmė pasipriešinimui, kolektyviniam atsakui į socialinio teisingumo trūkumą ir nugalinimą. Autorė analizuoja, kaip normatyviniai šeimos, motinystės ir sėkmės modeliai susikerta su socialinės klasės, lyties ir darbo kategorijomis, formuodami tyrime dalyvavusių moterų gyvenimo patirtis. Ši disertacija pristato autentiškus naratyvus, kuriais siekiama atkreipti dėmesį į vienišų mamų Lietuvoje patiriamus iššūkius traktuojant juos ne kaip individualią nesėkmę ar asmeninių trūkumų, klaidingų pasirinkimų nulemtą situaciją, bet kaip struktūrinę problemą. Autorė analizuoja nuolatinę prekariškumo būseną, kurioje išryškėja sisteminė nelygybė ir bandymai jai priešintis.

Disertacija suskirstyta į šešis skyrius, kuriuose nagrinėjamos vienišoms mamoms šiuolaikinėje Lietuvoje aktuali problematika: pokyčiai posovietinėje visuomenėje; vienišų mamų patiriama stigmatizacija ir materialiniai sunkumai; išgyvenimo strategijos ir mechanizmai, įskaitant labai svarbius neformalius giminaičių, kaimynų ir draugų paramos tinklus; motinystės „nesėkmės“ konceptualus persvarstymas kaip politinė kritika neoliberalizmo lūkesčiams. Remdamasi interviu medžiaga, dalyvaujamojo stebėjimo rezultatais ir etnografinio dienoraščio įrašais, autorė iliustruoja, kaip tyrime dalyvavusios vienišos mamos veikia ir įsigalina, pasitelkdamos bendruomeniškumą, rūpestį, solidarumą ir kūrybiškai strateguodamos. Svarbus šio tyrimo dėmuo yra kolektyviai patiriamas pasipriešinimas idealizuotos, tobulos motinystės scenarijams, primestiems stiprybės ir autonomijos siekiams.

Šis darbas prisideda prie feministinės etnografijos, posocialistinių studijų ir reprodukcinio darbo politikos tyrimų, sutelkdamas dėmesį į moterų, esančių dominuojančių naratyvų paraštėse, balsus.

Raktiniai žodžiai: vienišos mamos, prekariškumas, posocializmas, Lietuva, neoliberalizmas, feministinė etnografija, socialinė reprodukcija, rūpesčio ir globos darbas, kasdienis gyvenimas, nesėkmė, pasipriešinimas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A surprising encounter on a regular winter day

A few months into my ethnographic fieldwork, back in the winter of 2016, a conversation took place at the local manicure salon in Kaunas. In extending my comfort zone into the realm of women's beauty spaces – a realm quite alien to me – my intention as an ethnographer was to slice the fabric of society all the way through, reaching previously unfamiliar layers. The procedure of the manicure lasted a half-hour longer than it should have, because the manicurist stopped working and gestured passionately while answering my simple question: *What's your daily life like in Kaunas, Lithuania?*

Laura: I am conducting research about life in Lithuania. How people live here, how they feel, what helps to make their lives liveable if they stay, for example, in Kaunas.

Brigita: Oh, how interesting! [...] I will tell you this: there are three categories of people – and this is not only my opinion, I've talked to many people and they all agree – strong, weak and desperate. The strong ones stay and try to live here: they fight, they work like hell, attempting to make their lives better. The weak ones also stay, but they cry and complain all the time, they drink, use violence, kill each other and themselves. And those who are in total despair and have no more hope of building a normal life here – they pack and leave.¹

A youthful and constantly smiling manicurist in her mid-40s was confident in telling me this. She said that she had talked to several people, and they had all agreed. Contrary to the common perception that the ones leaving are courageous – those who travel, who move, who are brave enough to change their environment, occupations, everyday language, social status and ties, in other words, to start their life anew – she argued that only the strongest endure here, in their homeland. Since that moment, I started searching for those who had stayed and who had remained strong, despite everything – or, perhaps, *because* of something. Whether by scientifically explainable circum-

¹ From ethnographic diary, conversation with manicurist Brigita, December 2016.

stances or by pure serendipity, in that moment, I realised what I needed to write about. My focus became clear: single mothers who are bound to stay and deal with daily precarity. These invisible women are hard to locate: they are well-educated and, at the same time, highly precarious, so their life stories are lurking in a blind spot – between total despair, poverty and celebratory success.

The strong ones who (must) endure – single mothers

To hell with all that *strength!* I don't want to be *strong* anymore if I have to do everything on my own – to earn money, to clean, to cook, to bring children to school, to fix the car, to take care of everything alone! I hate having to be *strong* all the time, if I can't stand on my feet at the end of the day... What is it for?! (Liucija, autumn 2016)

Liucija, a single mother of four, nearly screamed this. I heard her, but I didn't *actually* hear what she was saying until much later, after having spent more than a year immersed in my ethnographic fieldwork in Lithuania. It was then that I came to wonder: are the strong ones – the ones who endure – the single mothers?

According to statistics, the share of single-parent households in Lithuania is 25%, one of the highest in Europe and comparable to other Baltic countries (Sweden 34%; Denmark 29%; Estonia 28%; Latvia 25%).² This is a large number, both in and of itself and compared to the EU average (14%). It is especially worrisome because in Lithuania, one out of every two single-parent families lives at risk of poverty (Atas, 2018).³ Despite its heterogeneity, single-mothers-in-Lithuania is a social group that has been particularly affected by the processes of transition in post-socialist Lithuania, including neoliberal reforms of the welfare system, impoverishment by dispossession and lack of affordable housing and childcare, as well as by stigmatisation (Skučienė, 2008; Atas, 2018). However, this group has been nearly neglected, with very little scholarly inquiry on it until quite recently, when social exclusion and

² “The share of single-parent households among all households with children in EU, 2020” (last viewed on 26 January 2023). Available from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210601-2>.

³ According to Eurostat statistics, in 2020, households composed of a single person with dependent children recorded the highest risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU (42.1 %) (last viewed on 29 June 2022). Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Children_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion. According to Lithuanian statistics, 51% of lone parents with children are at the risk of poverty (last viewed on 02 August 2022). Available from: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0d6805ef63ac41b0a2ac3e4a9037ca5>.

risk of poverty of single parents gained more space in sociological research in Lithuania (Kanopienė, 2002; Gustienė, 2007; Maslauskaitė, 2014; Stankūnienė et al., 2016; Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017), which also indicated inadequate living conditions and a lack of institutional support (Aidukaitė, 2014; Atas, 2018; Skubiejūtė, 2020).

Moreover, structural gender inequalities in Lithuanian society determine women's positions in the formal labour market, lower their earnings, and generate the extensive amount of time required of them for unpaid reproductive labour (Maslauskaitė, 2017). As the main responsibility for childcare and domestic matters still falls upon the shoulders of women, their chances and opportunities in the paid labour market are greatly curtailed, pushing the women into precarious conditions and various informal gigs to earn a living. In-work poverty in Lithuania is mainly "associated with being a woman, having children, belonging to a single-parent household, and being employed in a precarious working environment" (Atas, 2019, p. 105).

As the forementioned studies have shown, when raising children alone, Lithuanian women are exposed to economic hardships much more than men are. Even well-educated women, who are expected to maintain a certain level of material well-being after the dissolution of the union (marriage or partnership), according to a study by Maslauskaitė (2017), experience similar disadvantages to their less educated counterparts. As the research results have shown, contrary to researchers' expectations, a woman's educational level was seen as insignificant in determining the perceived changes in her material well-being after divorce, while a direct link between education and economic stability was barely visible (Maslauskaitė, 2017, p. 627).⁴

With regard to coping strategies, the most common ones among Lithuanian men (such as emigration, substance abuse or suicide) are not among the preferred choices for women.⁵ For example, emigration rates are more than twice as high among married people than among divorced ones (12,889 and 5,255 in 2016, respectively), which adds to the picture of single mothers being immensely dependent on family ties and other established social networks regarding childcare and other reproductive labour

⁴ One of the hypotheses of Maslauskaitė's research was that well-educated single mothers must be better rewarded in the labour market even after the divorce, so the perception of changes in material well-being should be positively linked to the educational resources (Maslauskaitė, 2017, p. 618). However, the hypothesis that "the perception of changes in material well-being will be positively linked to the educational resources of single mothers" was not proven correct (ibid, p. 626).

⁵ According to the official Lithuanian statistics portal, although not totally absent, suicide rates are greatly higher among Lithuanian men than women (52.5 deaths in 100,000 for men, 8.3 in 100,000 for women in 2016) (last viewed on 15 February 2019). Available from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt>.

(Maslauskaitė, 2017, p. 627). For these women, emigrating means departing from the circle of care, while leaving the social safety network is likely to produce even larger precarity, uncertainty and exclusion.⁶

Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to provide a localised and historically contextualised analysis of single motherhood in contemporary Lithuania. Specifically, I aim to delve into the fabric of their everyday lives and the strategies they use to manage their situation. My research focuses on well-educated single mothers residing in Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city, and it aims at unravelling how they navigate challenging circumstances in times of structural precarity. Hence, the overarching aim of this study is to examine the everyday lives of single mothers in Lithuania and shed light on gendered parenthood in a post-socialist semi-periphery. By delving into the lived experiences and narratives recounted by single mothers, this research is positioned within the realms of post-socialist and decolonial theorising, feminist materialist politics and precarity studies. Guided by the insights of Nancy Fraser (2016) and Silvia Federici (2012), I aim to analyse the inherent contradictions of reproductive labour and motherhood.

In addressing my central research inquiry – namely, the everyday strategies of well-educated single mothers in Kaunas, Lithuania – I adopt a more targeted approach by posing a number of specific questions:

1. What specific strategies do single mothers devise to effectively manage their daily circumstances, encompassing both their material and psychological well-being?
2. How do the intersecting categories of class, gender, labour (both productive and reproductive), motherhood, family and singleness manifest, evolve and acquire significance within their daily lives and perceptions?
3. How is the labour of caregiving executed and received? To whom does the responsibility of care extend and under what circumstances? What implications does self-care hold within this context?
4. What modes of resistance are employed, articulated or imagined by single mothers as they navigate their daily routines?

⁶ In Lithuania, it is rather common for people to emigrate with the whole extended family, which allows relocating without losing a private safety net.

Shifting away from personal accounts that frame single motherhood as a fixed position of individual shortcoming, subject to rectification, normalisation, victimisation or, at times, celebration, I aim at redefining single motherhood as a vigorously contested construct deeply ingrained in the capitalist framework and women's subordination. My thesis aims at providing a structural analysis, problematising and destabilising such seemingly persistent concepts as *family*, *care*, *labour* and *failure*.

Previous research

This dissertation is located at the intersection of three major fields of research. Firstly, it belongs to gender studies and contributes to feminist theorisations about social reproduction and motherhood, unpaid care labour. Politicisation of care is at the centre of this contribution. Secondly, my thesis enters into discussion with post-socialist feminist researchers, while also reaching out to the still developing decolonial feminist tradition of epistemic disobedience to and decentralising of the West. Thirdly, this research taps into the broader field of ethnography of everyday life.

In the following two sections, I will give an overview of the relevant research for my study on single motherhood in Lithuania, divided, respectively, into (1) research on (single) motherhood and (2) research on precarity and neoliberalism in post-socialist countries in general. Other relevant research will be discussed in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Relevant research on motherhood and single mothers

The question of single motherhood is analysed and theorised by anthropologists, sociologists, researchers in literature and culture studies alike. It taps into a broader, conceptually intertwined field of motherhood studies (Ruddick, 1980, 1989; Rich, 1976/1995; Silva, 1996; Lawler, 2000; Arendell, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Rose, 2018) as well as into more specific theorisations of singleness and the most prominent implications of it (Duncan & Edwards, 2003; Juffer, 2006; Blagojević, 2012; Chow, 2019). In one of the foundational feminist texts, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* – an emblematic feminist interrogation of motherhood – Adrienne Rich (1976/1995) examines motherhood as an experience as well as an institution and ideology. While it was still a hot topic over the next couple decades, with publications such as Sara Ruddick's (1989) *Maternal Thinking – Towards a Politics of Peace*, Lauri Umansky's (1996)

Motherhood Reconceived, Sharon Hays' (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* and Elizabeth B. Silva's edited collection *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist Perspectives on Lone Motherhood* (1996), it seemingly lost its momentum – just like material feminists' claims about reproductive work – and it was pushed to the margins of feminist scholarship (Kawash, 2011, p. 970). As Samira Kawash points out in her extensive overview of motherhood related publications in the U.S. at the turn of the century, maternity issues have felt “uneasy” within the broader feminist agenda. Following Lisa Brush, who questioned “whether the shift from patriarchy to *maternity* signals a sophisticated analysis of the nuances in women’s activism, or a retreat” (1996, p. 430, cf. Kawash, 2011, p. 971), Kawash (2011) agrees that there has been a backlash against and a certain rejection of motherhood issues within feminism. Jesook Song (2014), in the epilogue to the volume *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*, agrees with this observation, suggesting that motherhood has indeed been “a subject of avoidance within feminist intellectual discussions precisely because of the difficulty in addressing motherhood as a central subject without reifying hetero-normative family and gender norms that ascribe a particular mothering role and image” (Song, 2014, p. 373). In keeping with their arguments, I will continue this discussion in my dissertation, filling the gaps in single motherhood studies not only by emphasising how single motherhood itself deviates from the norm of the heteronormative nuclear family, but also by revealing mothers’ narratives, their ways of surviving and how these reflect the problematics of normality, failure, wellbeing and agency.

Stigmatisation and coping strategies

Previous research has shown, to some extent, an interest in studying single mothers’ strategies for making ends meet (Edin & Lein, 1997; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Cherlin, 2006; Fox, 2006; Yazdanpanah, 2008; Utrata, 2015; Härkönen, 2018). There is also a body of work that examines the stigma of single motherhood as well as various attempts to redefine it (Juffer, 2006; Sidel, 2006; Winkler, 2014; Rose, 2018; Carlbäck et al., 2012; Utrata, 2015). However, these studies mostly focus on single motherhood in terms of economic disadvantage and material well-being.

For example, in her dissertation *Supporting Livelihood. Low-paid Single Mothers’ Sustenance in Sweden*, Soheyla Yazdanpanah (2008) focuses on low-paid single mothers in Sweden and their means for making ends meet in terms of economic and social sustenance. Based on Bourdieu’s concepts of “capital” and “habitus”, as well as Beverly Skeggs’ concept of “respectability”,

Yazdanpanah provides an extensive analysis of actions, reasoning and prioritising made by single mothers regarding sustenance. This study is relevant to my dissertation not only because it deals with women's ways of navigating precarity, but also because it highlights the importance of class, downward social mobility (especially, of Iranian-born immigrants) and a certain habitus that plays out in decision making about simple, everyday choices such as proper clothing, "right food", qualitative leisure time activities, good education and cultural consumption (Yazdanpanah, 2008, pp. 277–278).

As studies on single mothers in Lithuania (Kanopienė, 2002), Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2012, p. 212), Hungary (Haney, 1999, p. 170), the U.S. (Sidel, 2006, p. 21; Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 173), and Great Britain (Gillies, 2006) demonstrate, not only do single mothers have to bear substantive economic consequences, but they also must cope with labels such as "state-assistance-bound" ("pašalpinė"), "asocial" ("asociali"), "unworthy", "dependent" or "needy".⁷ A study of single motherhood in North America conducted by Ruth Sidel (2006) portrays the deep stigma that single mothers face, as opposed to the praise single fathers usually get for raising children alone. In stark contrast to the admiration that men – single fathers – often receive, single mothers are commonly met with hostility and condemnation. According to Sidel (2006, p. 21), despite being solely or primarily responsible "for feeding, clothing, housing, and nurturing their children, often with grossly inadequate social and economic resources, [...] they [single mothers] must function in an environment in which they are constantly being judged and criticized – a social and political context in which they are systematically stereotyped, stigmatized, and even despised".

A significant insight about stigmatisation is articulated by Jennifer Utrata (2015). Utrata found that increasing admission that Russian society is going through a "gender crisis", which entails recognition of "weak men" and a "weak state", correlates with a decrease of social stigma of single motherhood. Whether this is also the case in current Lithuanian society will be further explored in this thesis, since in terms of sociological research in Lithuania, studies of single mothers have been mostly limited to the socio-economic characteristics of the mothers, the wellbeing and the risk of poverty of their children, as well as various parameters of social exclusion (Šileika & Zabaraukaitė, 2008; Stankūnienė et al., 2016; Maslauskaitė, 2015; 2017), with

⁷ Also, there is a growing number of non-academic articles and social media posts that focus on the undeserved denigration of single motherhood (last viewed September 10, 2019). Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/19/single-mothers-uk-riots-tanya-gold>.

only a few exceptions (Kanopienė, 2002; Juodeškaitė & Mažeikienė, 2012). Importantly, these studies highlight economic vulnerability of lower-educated, rural-residing, non-married mothers and women's dependency (of nearly 50%) on a formal social support system. While it is crucial to continue conducting such studies, I'm asking questions that go beyond the impoverishment of single mothers perceived as a homogenous marginalized group, questioning the prevalent discourse of "loss" and "failure", lack of "success" or "luck" and focusing on structural injustice, governmental indifference and unequal power relations. Stigmatisation and marginalisation come along with the notion of a "normal" or "proper" nuclear family, which serves as a measuring stick for determining deviance. This is especially pertinent to a study conducted in Lithuania, where public opinion about single parenthood has tended not to be positive, but rather quite the opposite (*see* Stankūnienė et al., 2003).⁸

Care work and love labour

Understanding *care as labour* is one of my central premises. As mothering is increasingly discussed in terms of labour (Fox, 2006; Newberry & Rosen, 2020), a constituent element of this, known as "affective labour" or "love labouring", also gets increasing attention (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017). In dialogue with Nancy Fraser, Cantillon and Lynch (2017) suggest adding a fourth dimension of social justice to the first three proposed by Fraser. While agreeing with Fraser that "equality of re/distribution, respect/recognition, and representation are vital to address economic, cultural, and political injustices", Cantillon and Lynch argue that there needs to be a fourth fundamental dimension to our considerations of social justice, namely, one concerned with relational justice and attempts to address love labour and affective inequalities (Cantillon & Lynch, 2017, p. 181).

In *Single Mothers in International Context: Mothers or Workers?* (edited by Duncan & Edwards, 2003), scholars engage in the analysis of mothering and work, as well as mothering *as* work. Furthermore, their comparative analyses are primarily concerned with single mothers' entitlements, gendered social rights and different welfare regimes which can be interpreted as a litmus test for national social policy and general justice. While this collection

⁸ This survey, which was carried out in 2001 by a group of Lithuanian researchers (with 1,400 respondents aged 18–75), revealed negative attitudes toward some features of the "modern family". The research has illustrated some conservative tendencies related to the society's concern with the decreasing number of marriages (Stankūnienė et al. 2003, 291). Moreover, the majority of respondents (88%) (especially those of an older age) disapproved, or strongly disapproved, of single parenting (Stankūnienė et al., 2003, p. 53).

offers a coherent comparative analysis across four dimensions of single motherhood – dominant and alternative discourses, welfare regimes and policies, labour market situation, and networks of support (Duncan & Edwards, 2003), it is limited to countries of “the centre” (i.e., the West). This limitation highlights the need to continue filling the knowledge gap across the (semi-)peripheries.⁹

In the post-socialist and Baltic Sea region, research on precarity and single motherhood after the fall of the Soviet Union are not only largely missing, but also often inaccessible because of language barriers.¹⁰ However, there are a few anthropological and sociological studies of the region written in English that offer significant empirical and theoretical insights. For example, an anthropological study on single motherhood in New Russia by Jennifer Utrata (2015) provides ethnographically rich material that reveals how single mothers, with a lot of help from their own mothers, manage the mundane work of day-to-day life along with the double transition they are experiencing (Utrata, 2015, p. 11). Her book *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia* examines the advent of market capitalism and its implications for mothers, both single and non-single. By way of ethnographic stories and interviews, Utrata (2015) reveals how women were latently encouraged to retreat to their “proper mission” – the private sphere of household and childrearing. Due to a combination of amplified pronatalist rhetoric promoting “true family values”, designed policy measures and increased women’s unemployment, women have been forced to “choose” motherhood over professional career paths.

The tendencies revealed by Utrata are similar to ones in Lithuania and other post-socialist countries, where women, who previously constituted half of the labour force outside the house while the welfare system took care of their children from an early age, felt trapped between the push for retraditionalisation and growing precarity (Kanopienė, 1998, p. 7; Gerber, 2011, p. 508; Hryciuk & Korolzcuk, 2016, p. 54; Lapinskė, 2018, p. 68). In New Russia, public childcare provision underwent drastic reductions, while the number of lone mothers grew exponentially (Utrata 2015, p. 231). As numerous research shows, the situation in *New Lithuania* is similar. In 2006 in

⁹ The case studies included in the collection are from Ireland, Britain, USA, Japan, Australia, Germany, France and Sweden. Calling these countries part of “the centre” I intend to highlight not (only) their economic leadership, but also – academic hegemony and knowledge production related power imbalances (see Cerwonka, 2008 and Suchland, 2011).

¹⁰ Those within the reach are, too, connected to Anglo-Saxon tradition, in terms of language, format or citation practices. And this dissertation certainly has the same limits.

Lithuania, while 93% of all lone parent-households were headed by a female, the provision of childcare services was among the lowest in Europe, together with Greece, Slovenia and Poland, according to a report on gender inequalities from the European Commission from 2006 (p. 94).

As Utrata (2015) observes, the sphere of social reproduction in Russia is still taken care of by women, regardless of whether they are married, in partnership or single. This insight contributes to my own analysis of social reproduction as unpaid and unrecognised labour, which, in the case of single mothers, adds to their *triple bind*, as suggested by Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado (2018) in their edited book *The Triple Bind of Single-Parent Families: Resources, Employment, and Policies*. While the *triple bind* can be understood as “the interplay between inadequate resources, inadequate employment and inadequate policies” (ibid, p. 2), single parents’ employment is increasingly negatively affected by current trends of instability and precariousness. In my thesis, I will examine the meaning of care and care as labour in order to show how care can be seen from different perspectives, both oppressive and emancipatory.

A voice of one’s own in a post-socialist region

In agreement with Kawash (2011, p. 971), I observe the lack of feminist research that is focused on “[g]iving voice to the experiences of motherhood and recognising the subjectivity and agency of mothers [...] [which are] clearly crucial feminist aims.” The absence of such stories is even greater when the subject in question is single motherhood. The voices that tell what it means to live as a single mother in a post-socialist context are particularly hard to find. Even when single motherhood is addressed in research, the emphasis is often placed on strategies and instruments that would help to empower single mothers by motivating them to gain new skills, increase flexibility and enhance their options to return to the formal labour market.

For example, in a co-authored article, Lithuanian researchers Juodeškaitė and Mažeikienė (2012) argue for the usefulness of a biographical research method – a method which they argue can help not only to understand individual single mothers’ life paths and choices, but also, importantly, to provide a structural analysis, when biographical stories are shared among other women with similar life stories. However, the article’s focus, in terms of empirical data analysis, is grounded largely in Giddens’s theories of structuration and reflexive self-identity, which puts individual strategies at the centre. The repertoire of strategies is divided into three groups: self-victimising, pragmatic and assertive (p. 179), which reiterates the emphasis

on the individual's efforts and responsibility to make one's own life better. Often, such characteristics as strong "will", "courage" and "strength" are named as prerequisites in order to return to a state of wellbeing (Juodeškaitė & Mažeikienė, 2012, pp. 184–5). While I find the authors' methodological approach helpful in terms of its theoretical and empirical findings, I also see the risk it carries of reinforcing a problematic neoliberal encouragement to solve structural problems individually.

Juodeškaitė and Mažeikienė (2012) stress the importance of expressing oneself aloud, of examining one's past mistakes (p. 183), and reflecting and planning future steps (p. 183, p. 187). The authors contend that such a process helps mothers to be more self-reflective while also assisting social workers in developing specific strategies to empower them (ibid, p. 165). While such research is important, especially in allowing "unheard voices" to be heard, its scope is still limited to poor women with traumatic experiences, psychological problems and mental instabilities.¹¹

Commonly, research in Lithuania, as well as in the post-socialist region in general, focuses largely on economic disadvantages and an inclination to poverty. Hence, there is a need for ethnographic scholarship that looks closer into the stories told by, and the experiences of, (single) mothers. Especially, there is a lack of research that sheds light on so called "negative" feelings and affects, such as guilt, anger, rage, fear and a sense of failure, perceived as a structural problem of gender, class and power inequalities.¹² As theorised by a number of feminist researchers (Lorde, 1993; Ross, 1995; Ross & Van Willigen, 1996; Cvetkovich, 2012; Rose, 2018), those negative effects and "ugly feelings" (to borrow a phrase from Ngai, 2005) can only be uncovered by listening more closely to the single mothers' themselves.

Beyond NGO-ization: the Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe (edited by Kerstin Jacobsson & Steven Saxonberg, 2016), is a compilation that has challenged the traditional notion of "social activism", disrupting the long-standing idea of the non-existence of resistance in post-socialist societies. It expands the scope of activism to include topics specifically related to, and initiatives by, mothers (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2016, pp. 1–3). One useful example for my research concerning single mothers is situated in post-socialist Poland. The chapter by Renata Hryciuk and Elżbieta

¹¹ This research is based on five interviews with single mothers of lower-class background, with no higher education or professional degree, mostly rurally based.

¹² There is a growing number of magazine articles, blogs, social media posts, zines, memoirs and self-help books that give voice to the nasty, angry, sad and harsh sides of motherhood reality; however, the scholarly work is still largely missing.

Korolczuk (2016) not only invokes the crucial intersection of class and gender, it examines three different social actions organised by Polish mothers, who identify social harms and demand better conditions. This chapter highlights women's agency as well as their conscious resistance to economic injustice, their united efforts for social action and their mobilising around the issues of dignified birth giving, preservation of the Alimony Fund and poor mothers' rights as tenants (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2016, pp. 49–50). The myth of “the weak potential for collective action” in the former Eastern Bloc countries (the so-called CEE countries)¹³ is repeatedly shattered by well-illustrated examples from Poland (ibid, p. 49). For example, “A national movement of single mothers for the reestablishment of the Alimony Fund”, which was mostly active between 2002 and 2007, is shown to have achieved some substantial gains and legal changes (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2016, pp. 50–51).

A collection edited by Katalin Fábian and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2017), *Rebellious Parents: Parental Movements in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia*, further examines the myth of passivity, providing examples of parenthood-related grassroots activism from Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Hungary and Bulgaria. This book provides valuable insights into a similar geopolitical context with mostly Catholic values and neoliberal democracy.

In line with the abovementioned scholarship, I will contribute by bringing in empirical examples of such collective awareness and reflexivity and provide a broader feminist analysis, located in contemporary precarity studies and social reproduction theory.

Single motherhood as a choice

Quite a few scholarly works, especially in the West, praise single motherhood as intentional, powerful and possibly subversive – as choice-ridden rather than oppressive. In her book *Single Mother: the Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual*, Jane Juffer (2006, p. 4) illustrates how “[s]ingle moms put together everyday life at a complex conjuncture of social, economic, political, and cultural forces.” Along with other researchers, she argues that feminist and LGBTQ movements have done a lot to challenge patriarchal notions of family, liberalising divorce laws and creating some space and agency for mothering without men. Even acknowledging the complicity of “choice” under the neoliberal regime, the mere demonstration of self-sufficiency,

¹³ Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia.

economic stability and self-confidence can produce some unexpected results that can contradict the liberalism and neoliberalism at hand (Juffer, 2006, p. 47). According to Juffer, “single mothers” is a category that gains respect precisely in terms of neoliberal ideology – by exerting the image of self-regulating, self-reliant citizen-consumer-subject (ibid, p. 4). This goes way beyond “self-sacrificing” motherhood – this is a new era of mothers as “domestic intellectuals” (ibid, pp. 10 & 48). In my study, I will investigate how such conclusions can be related to the historical context, where such encouragements for self-improvement, self-reliance and self-confidence have been continuously emphasised in a post-socialist spirit of independence and liberation.

A handful of researchers (most often residing outside the CEE) call for highlighting elements of choice and independence, painting an image of a more hopeful and possibly transgressive future for single mothers across the globe (Mannis, 1999; Hertz, 2006; Juffer, 2006; Jordana-Pröpper, 2013). However, this approach often risks overlooking material and psychological aspects of raising children (e.g., precarity, sexism, stigmatisation and burn-outs), while it also tends to lack a broader recognition of the burden of social reproduction labour (care work), which is generally very demanding, yet invisible. The question of choice remains difficult to handle in a society based upon capitalist logic.

As can be expected in neoliberal capitalism, there is a risk that by over-emphasising the choice-ridden aspect of single motherhood – agency rather than powerlessness – economic, racial and gender inequalities will be glossed over or completely obscured. This resonates with Barbara Rothman’s observation, made in a review of books on single motherhood in the US.¹⁴ Based on the study of Rosana’s Hertz in 2006, Rothman (2009, p. 325) states that: “these are pretty much what we think of as middle-class women. They were not without support, had financial as well as social capital”. And although some single mothers in my research maintain some financial and social capital, often they don’t live a middle-class life. Being a single mother *by choice* often reveals, to the contrary, that these women had no real choice, as their options were limited: choosing between a rock and a hard place is not really a choice. Importantly, the question remains: what does it mean to raise children? “Why are these women doing this alone [...]? [...] Why is it,

¹⁴ The books Rothman reviews are: Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2005), *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*; Rosanna Hertz (2006), *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women Are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family*; and Ruth Sidel (2006), *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream*.

repeatedly, wave after wave of feminism notwithstanding, that it is women, overwhelmingly women, who are raising children?” (Rothman, 2009, p. 325) This points in the direction of my investigation, where the line between single motherhood as a powerful individual choice and neoliberal ideology induced pride over carrying this double burden (or this triple-bind) is very thin.

Relevant research on precarity and neoliberalism

In terms of research on precarity and neoliberalism in the post-socialist region, most studies point to the historical moment – the collapse of Soviet Union – which was followed by immediate restructuring of major industries, initiation of land reforms and privatisation of state property, accompanied by growing unemployment rates and implementation of neoliberal policies founded on a promise of economic growth (Harvey, 2005; Kalb, 2014; Atas, 2018). According to David Harvey (2005), for something like neoliberalism to become so powerful, it needed to appeal to people’s values and desires. Therefore, the underlying aspects of “human dignity” and “individual freedom”, paved the way for the adaptation to neoliberalism in Eastern Europe with triumphant success (Harvey, 2005). Situated in a political landscape where individual freedom had been highly restricted, neoliberal ideology gained substantial velocity and eventually led to dispossession (Ost, 2015; Saleminck & Rasmussen, 2016).

The transition from a state to a market economy resulted in a sort of shock-therapy for regular people, who bore the cost of these transformations, experiencing immense economic inequalities and increased poverty.¹⁵ Despite the appeal of the ideals of freedom and choice, regular people experienced dire consequences as political agendas became geared towards the prioritisation of economic policies rather than sustaining or re-creating the “generous social safety networks that were essential to prevent rapid deterioration of living standards within the population” (Atas, 2018, p. 17). Many authors review the losses that welfare systems experienced, as many post-socialist countries submitted themselves voluntarily to neoliberal ideology and the new game rules of the free market economy (Repečkaitė, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Berardi, 2009; Evans, 2015; Matos, 2019).¹⁶

¹⁵ According to statistics, Lithuania remains one of the poorest countries in the EU with one of the highest income inequalities (Skučienė, 2008, p. 33). Furthermore, in 2013, around 30% of the Lithuanian population was experiencing risk of poverty and social exclusion (Atas, 2018).

¹⁶ In the case of Lithuania, as Daiva Repečkaitė (2011) shows in her analysis of the 2009 riots in Vilnius, Lithuania, the attempts to protest economic shock therapy brought about not only violent clashes with the police, but also revealed the popular rhetoric and symbolic construction of the “losers of transition” (p. 62).

On the one hand, similar processes of precarisation, dispossession, exploitation, gender-based discrimination and the strengthening of global chains of accumulation can be recognisable across continents (Mies, 1986/2014; Tsing, 2005). These processes are commonly defined by intense possessive individualism, neoliberalism induced individualistic isolation, competition, anxiety and increasing decline in well-being (Harvey, 2012, p. 14). Research on precarity and neoliberalism provides ample illustrations of the effects that can be observed, to varying degrees, universally, across geographical locations, class, gender, race, age, ability, ethnicity, etc. (McRobbie, 2011; Briggs, 2012; Zechner, 2014; Meehan & Strauss, 2015; Eriksson, 2018). On the other hand, the effects of regime changes in post-socialist countries have their own particularities, which add to the understanding of these processes of precarisation (which will be addressed further down).

Precarity is, indeed, an underlying condition that, according to statistics, is recognisable for Lithuanian people, as well as for many people in other places around the world (Armano & Murgia, 2017; Spyridakis, 2017; Evans, 2016; Worth, 2016; Mattoni, 2015; Porta et al., 2015a; Casas-Cortés, 2014; Haukanes, 2013; Vij, 2013).

Precarity in European semi-peripheries and post-socialist countries

With regard to semi-peripheries, there has been an increased interest in research on structural precarity. *Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods. Subjectivities and Resistance* (edited by Armano, Bove and Murgia, 2017) and *The New Social Division: Making and Unmaking Precariousness* (edited by Donatella della Porta, Sakari Hänninen, Martti Siisiäinen and Tiina Silvasti, 2015) are two volumes that provide rich empirical material by mapping precarity, instability of livelihoods, anxiety and labour insecurity across several semi-peripheral countries in Europe. Notably, theorisation of precarity as well as empirical data on resisting it keep appearing, for example from Spain (Casas-Cortés & Cobzabias, 2017), Italy (Mattoni, 2015; Armano & Murgia, 2017), Greece (Mattoni & Vogiatzoglou, 2014; Vogiatzoglou, 2015; Spyridakis, 2017), and Portugal (Matos, 2019). In many ways, these cases attest to experiences similar to those had in many Eastern European states of economic hardships and austerity measures that

The author shows, among other things, how class boundaries were guarded by scapegoating *colonizers of the past* and *homo sovieticus*, instead of challenging neoliberal morale.

have left a huge part of the population in precarious and uncertain conditions after the financial crisis of 2008 (to be discussed in Chapter 2).

However, as I will argue, precarity in the particular Lithuanian context has been experienced differently than in places and among groups where precarious living has been passed on from generation to generation (see Standing, 2011; Ross, 2009). As Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 20) points out, “[p]eople born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected.” For Narotzky and Besnier (2014, p. S4), the key here is the “breakdown of expectations”. Indeed, Lithuania, as is the case in many other post-socialist countries, still has a somewhat functioning welfare state that many people rely upon. However, due to economic instability, alarming demographic tendencies and neoliberal governing it is being dismantled, greatly reducing and reconfiguring state provisions (Aidukaitė, 2014; Woolfson & Sommers, 2016; Atas, 2018, 2019).

Precarity, as a lack of welfare systems and as an experience of lacking resources and stability, has been largely naturalised in post-socialist countries and ascribed to the “perpetual state of transition”, which, given the past 30 years of independence, could be thought of as already finished. However, Dijana Jelača and Danijela Lugarić (2018) discuss post-socialism as a lived experience rather than as a scholarly paradigm. In *The Future of (Post) Socialism: Eastern European Perspectives*, they suggest that “[e]ven after it [socialism] was replaced by transitional democracies and neoliberal capitalist economic systems, socialism and its legacy continued to influence everyday life and cultural production in hybrid ways that reflected its ongoing political and discursive importance” (ibid, p. 5).

While I do not understand post-socialism in terms of progress and “temporal linearity”, which implies finality or something that has already happened, I also avoid treating post-socialist space as “perpetual liminality” (in the manner of Jelača & Lugarić, 2018). Instead of recognising that East Europe has been “lost in transition”, to borrow a phrase from Ghodsee (2011), I aim rather at examining micro realities of the post-socialist semi-periphery. Hence, I follow Jelisaveta Blagojević and Jovana Timotijević (2018, p. 77) who, by invoking the metaphor of the “failed metronome”, seek to excavate what they refer to as “small stories”: “histories of oppression and resistance, invisibility and silence, [that] could produce different archives and narrations based on redefining the regimes of what is visible and audible”. Blagojević and Timotijević (2018, p. 80) suggest that in the grand narrative of post-socialist history, the previously unheard minor voices might offer

“quite different rhythm and pace; one’s tempo might bring a disruption, a sudden hope, a gap in the prevalent steady and monotonous beat, as if the metronome of history had been irreparably broken, or simply forgotten in another spatial-temporal dimension.”

Relying on Gilles Deleuze, Blagojević and Timotijević (2018) propose an approach called “minoritarian politics”, that oversteps identitarian frames and treats post-socialism in a queer way, as disorienting, not only in terms of space, but also with respect to time. In their essay, the authors bring in the possibility of “unthinkable futures”, which have the potential of simultaneously inheriting not merely the nostalgia of a broken socialism, but – by way of queering the linearity of time – also the possibility of the future of *post-socialism* or socialism in the future (Blagojević & Timotijević, 2018, pp. 78–79). Their volume examines that “sense of urgency for needing to envision feasible alternatives to the iron grip of peak neoliberalism and the resulting, ever-deepening social precarity rapidly expanding on a mass scale” (Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 6).

In terms of knowledge production in a post-socialist context, the relationship between precariousness (to speak along with Judith Butler) and neoliberalism is often discussed in other terms: the nation’s economic instability and decline (Blagojević, 2012; Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016; Babović, 2018) and/or poverty, disappointment and various traumatic effects of austerity measures on the populations (Ghodsee, 2011; Repečkaitė, 2011; Haukanes, 2013; Woolfson & Sommers, 2016; Atas, 2018, 2019). The conceptualisation of an escalating precarity in terms of neoliberal governing (Čakardić, 2017; Dzenovska, 2018) and neoliberal governmentality in terms of precarity (Kóczé, 2016; Saar & Aavik, 2021) entered the scholarly scene in Eastern Europe around a decade ago. Within the broadly defined discipline of gender studies, the process of “neoliberalisation” and “governmental precarization” (*see* Lorey, 2015) is often analysed from the viewpoint of the feminist critique of the deteriorating contract between liberal feminism and capitalism. Numerous scholars from post-socialist countries increasingly demonstrate that neoliberal politics support consumption instead of production, redistribution and social reproduction (Vonderau, 2008; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015; Petó, 2016; Čakardić, 2017).¹⁷

An important trend of post-socialist research has been connecting revivals of nationalist movements and conservative politics with the consequences of

¹⁷ Also see Bielskienė, Jolanta (2020), *Unlimited Liberal Feminism in Lithuania* [Viewed on 2 March 2020]. Available from: <https://www.transform-network.net/en/blog/article/unlimited-liberal-feminism-in-lithuania/>.

political neglect and of growing precarity in many post-Soviet countries. It has been repeatedly shown how disregarding insecure and precarious conditions have produced dangerous liaisons that use “gender as symbolic glue”, facilitating the instalment of conservative regimes and/or illiberal democracies (Kováts & Põim, 2015; Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető, 2017; Christou & Michail, 2018). According to Erzsébet Barát (2020), the logic of “us” versus “them” (as in “us, the Hungarian people”, or in “us, the Polish people”, as it has been the case) produces certain homogenisation “around which diverse social groups that live in fear of precarity, losing their autonomy, their trust in the possibility of transparent political institutions, can conveniently be called upon to come together and re/imagine themselves as ‘strong defenders’ of the ‘cultural values’ of the ‘nation’ [...]” (Barát, 2020, p. 26). Rephrasing Barát, I would argue that the campaigns of “anti-genderism”, “anti-EU” and “anti-liberalism” are fuelled not only by *fear* of precarity, but by actual precarity, dispossession and poverty.

As research in Latvia reveals, a common way of dealing with aspects of material scarcity and downward social mobility is by increasing resilience (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 19). This conclusion is drawn from studying people’s responses to the severity of austerity measures in Latvia, following the crisis of 2008. Transforming Albert Hirschmann’s model of “exit, voice, and loyalty” into her own model of “viewing, leaving, staying or protesting”, Dzenovska (2018) analyses a set of survival strategies of Eastern Europeans, pointing not only to high levels of resilience and endurance but also to feelings of nostalgia. Subjective feelings of precarity might be exaggerated by nostalgia and memories of stability in the Soviet past, while contemporary Latvia (as well as Lithuania) is often portrayed as an exemplary case of smooth transitioning to neoliberalism and the handling of austerity measures.

However, although Dzenovska’s (2018) analysis is useful to my study in terms of processes of ongoing structural precarisation and strategies of survival in the grey zone of Eastern Europe, it is gender blind. Thus, building upon Dzenovska’s (2018) arguments about a shrinking welfare system, nostalgia, and resilience, I will further contribute to the field of precarity and neoliberalism studies by helping to fill the void of research into post-socialist countries by analysing gender in relation to structural precarity and reactions to it.

Precarity, neoliberalism and gender

In discussing precarity and gender on a structural level, the first thing to emphasize is that capitalist accumulation has been inextricably dependent

upon unpaid reproductive labour by women (Mies, 1986/2014). Concerns about unwaged women's labour raised almost half-a-century ago are still unresolved (Federici, 1975; McRobbie, 2011), and, according to contemporary ethnographers (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014a; Eriksson, 2018), the feminisation of labour is an ongoing issue. Women constitute a desirable labour force that is highly skilled, docile, flexible and most of all – cheap (Eriksson, 2018, p. 197) – a fact which continues to reinforce the point that precarity is extremely gendered. As Åsa Eriksson (2018, p. 198) argues in *Resisting Feminized Precarity*, the recent global attention to precarity often overlooks the fact that women throughout the world have been mostly working precariously, without stable contracts or favourable conditions, and performing a lot of unpaid labour.

Indeed, it is the unpaid labour that disproportionately burdens women in all places throughout the global capitalist system. However, the stability of waged work had, to some extent, been guaranteed in most socialist countries. For example, based upon 2011 data from the World Bank, Avlijaš (2018, p. 36) argues that “Eastern Europe had the highest female labour force participation (FLFP) in the world during socialism”, which, after the transition, was temporarily changed in some post-socialist countries and irreversibly upturned in some others, where low female participation in the labour force “has become a more permanent feature of their economies” (ibid, p. 36). Due to more stable social security and the nearly life-long working contracts that existed for them during socialist times, post-socialist women came to experience the new conditions differently.

Similar observations are provided by Anastasia Christou and Domna Michail (2018), which draw from an oral history project entitled “Gendered Histories of Resilience and Resistance: Eastern European Women’s Narratives of Mobility and Survival”. By way of narrative ethnography, the authors raise questions of post-socialist conditions for migrant women workers and examine their precarious post-transitional experiences in the new market economy (Christou & Michail, p. 70). One of their findings reveals the “sweet nostalgia” for a sense of security that was arguably felt under socialism. It is a daily feeling of stability and confidence that one’s basic needs, such as a place of residence, healthcare and education, will be met (Christou & Michail, 2018, p. 84). The authors also highlight women’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances, naming it “operational resilience”. This term is used to define Eastern European female migrants as being more adaptable and more resilient precisely because of the psychosocial effects and traumas that the Soviet past had brought upon them (Christou & Michail,

2018, p. 86). Acknowledging the significance and manifestations of agency and agentic practices, I will critically examine the gendered dimensions of strength and endurance in relation to my study of “always resilient” and “strong” single mothers.

Along the same lines, Maarja Saar and Kadri Aavik (2021) discuss women’s coping options, in an article on Estonian single mothers and neoliberalism. According to them, the lack of research into the impact of neoliberalism on gender roles in Eastern Europe, is evident. Such a gap in knowledge is surprising given the sociological reports that recognise the Baltic states as far more neoliberal than the rest of Europe (Saar & Aavik, 2021). In their research, Saar and Aavik focus on the additional burden placed upon single mothers by a neoliberal national ideology with its emphasis on individual choice and upon an appraisal of individual coping strategies without relying on state support (*ibid*, p. 2).

As shown in similar studies, being rational, self-motivating and calculating, as required by the neoliberal governmentality, is by far the best survival strategy that will render a single mother “respectable”, “strong”, “worthy”, “normal” and “successful” (Yazdanpanah, 2008; Blagojević, 2012; Lapinskė, 2018; Saar & Aavik, 2021). Blame, as well as a perceived failure to perform the role of a “perfect mother” – “yummy mummy”¹⁸ – is also present in the Lithuanian context, and I will proceed to analyse these processes, adding to the body of feminist work by providing empirical evidence from my ethnographic research, similarly to the study by Saar and Aavik (2021), which helps to fill the gaps in post-socialist, semi-peripheral, Eastern European feminist knowledge. The attempt to produce decentralised knowledges and to conceptualise women’s experiences in the CEE region from a critical standpoint rather than an essentialist one (Tlostanova, 2017; Morell & Gradskova, 2018; Gradskova, 2020) is a significant feature of my research, and I will continue this discussion in the later section on decolonial options.

In terms of the literature on resistance to neoliberalisation in all spheres of life, Elżbieta Korolczuk (2016) together with Katalin Fábian (2017) lead the way with their research on women’s circumstances in post-socialist Poland, their activism and the issues of precarity and parenthood that they face. In her essay “Neoliberalism and Feminist Organizing: from ‘NGO-ization of Resistance’ to Resistance against Neoliberalism”, Korolczuk (2016, p. 34) convincingly argues that despite the fact that Poland shares the same post-communist tendencies as other post-Soviet Eastern European countries

¹⁸A concept used to define a maternal ideal in the UK (*see* Littler 2013).

of uncritically embracing free-market democracy, and notwithstanding the criticism for the effects of transformation and its having accepted the hegemonic success story and neoliberal ideology of post-transitional recovery, cases and instances of resistance and grassroots mobilisations are possible and even effective, even though, often, temporary (ibid, p. 39). With respect to motherhood related issues and alliances, Korolczuk (2016) argues for the need to (re)construct the notion of community as a feminist project and develop mutual support networks and alliances. Certainly, such attempts can have drawbacks due to contemporary conservative political trends such as pronatalism and re-familiasation (*also see* Morell & Gradskova, 2018). However, in Korolczuk's view, in order to be ethical and effective, such networks and alliances must "be truly intersectional and firmly based on inclusive definitions of motherhood/parenthood" (2016, p. 39).

Regarding Lithuania, there hasn't been much research on structural precarity until recently. In her article, Dryžaitė (2017, p. 84) provides an overview of various dimensions of precarity as a concept, commenting mostly on economic dimensions: security vs. insecurity of the labour market, employment/work, skills reproduction, income and representation. She also adds a short note on the way Judith Butler conceptualises the precarious condition. Of relevance to this study are Dryžaitė's analysis of the affects produced by a daily sense of precariousness, such as anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (2017, p. 86). Following M. Casas-Cortes (2014), Dryžaitė concludes her discussion with a call to understand precarity both as an analytical instrument for analysing the neoliberal economy and social/political processes that take place in these new conditions as well as something that affects everybody (Dryžaitė, 2017, p. 94).

In terms of gendered precarity, Bučaitė-Vilkė and Tereškinas (2016) study Lithuanian men's precarious situation. Examining trajectories of young unemployed men, the authors discuss three distinct working male identities associated with ways of coping: "desperate conformists", "liberated dreamers" and those "lost in work transition" (ibid, p. 197).

Theoretical framework and concepts

My overarching theoretical framework is Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). The key element in my theoretical approach is social reproduction, which has been part of feminist debates on care, production and reproduction, as well as its analyses of gender oppression and its critiques of capitalism for several decades. I begin my analysis from a recognition of the problems inherent

within our still gendered division of labour (*see* Ferguson, 2020) along with an awareness that “[g]ender oppression in capitalist societies is rooted in the subordination of social reproduction to production for profit” (Arruzza et al., 2018, p. 121). My ambition is to further advance the discussion on these issues by providing an ethnographically grounded analysis of how gender, labour and precarity under neoliberal governance are intertwined.

As single mothers represent a group who generally perform the work of social reproduction (in addition to the work required for sustenance), social reproduction theory is a useful framework that allows for feminist theorisation of gender oppression in relation to class and capitalist expansion. While SRT admits that capitalism did not “invent” the subordination of women, it is committed to the idea that capitalism has, nonetheless, maintained that subordination by establishing structural frameworks containing new forms of *sexism* (Arruzza et al., 2018). As frontrunners of SRT, Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2018, p. 121) suggest, “[t]he key innovation [of capitalism] was to separate the making of people from the making of profit, to assign the first job to women, and to subordinate it to the second.”¹⁹

The single mothers in my study are, as mentioned, all well educated women who could be placed somewhere between the lower middle class and upper working class. Most of them are neither property owners nor do they belong to the poor working class or the feminised labour force. Given their well-founded middle-class aspirations, I find it useful to analyse their everyday strategies in the context of Lithuanian structural precarity. Therefore, the theoretical debates on structural precarity and precariousness will be an important framework in this study. Located in contemporary Lithuania, my research acknowledges the importance of the post-socialist context, connecting the Soviet past to current collective imaginations and processes of meaning making.

¹⁹ I want to make a brief remark on my theoretical standpoint. In this thesis, I rely primarily on social reproduction theory and its more recent theorisations, while bearing in mind that arguments concerning the division between production and reproduction, as well as the gendered division of labour, were already formulated in the 1970s. Within social reproduction theory, however, there is an important difference in foundational claims regarding capital accumulation and reproductive labour. For example, Lise Vogel argues that reproductive labour is essential for capitalism but takes place outside the market and therefore does not directly generate capitalist value. By contrast, Maria Mies and Silvia Federici contend that reproductive labour is integral to capitalist value creation and accumulation, even when it remains unpaid and invisible. Precisely because this labour is unpaid, capitalism benefits indirectly, yet strongly, from it (*see* Vogel, 1983/2013; Federici, 2012; Mies, 1986/2014; Bhattacharya, 2017). While Lise Vogel’s contribution is important to my overall argument, this thesis aligns with the standpoint advanced by Maria Mies and Silvia Federici.

Reproductive labour and Social Reproduction Theory

While Marxists have focused their attention mostly on the production of goods, Marxist feminists have expanded the scope of analysis to include, among other things, the necessary labour that includes the care and nurturing of people, which is social reproduction. Originating in Marxism, social reproduction theory holds that society is not created, maintained and reproduced on its own, but by actual human labour (Vogel, 1983/2013; 2017). However, while the capitalist system “acknowledges productive labour for the market as the sole form of legitimate ‘work,’ [...] the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labour power, is naturalized into nonexistence” (Bhattacharya 2017b, p. 2). It is important to emphasise that social reproduction is not entirely unpaid, and it is not only based on affective or kin relationships; parts of it are acknowledged as paid work, arranged through markets and states (Braedley & Luxton, 2015, p. x). In addition to focusing on the lack of institutionalised support systems for the sphere of social reproduction, I will also problematise the mechanisms that separate production and reproduction. As social reproduction theorists largely agree upon, unpaid and unrecognised reproductive labour is at the root of the oppression of women in capitalist patriarchies (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006; Fraser, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017a; Ćakardić, 2018).

Broadly speaking, reproductive labour, understood as the reproduction of labour power and of society itself, is a set of processes, historically organised around the maintenance and renewal of the work force in specific ways, through “embodied subjects, differently gendered and racialised subjects, in and through hierarchically and oppressively structured institutions and practices, such as private households, welfare states, slavery and global labour markets” (Vogel, 2015)²⁰. Of significance to my study, an essentially Marxist SRT approach allows for the reintroduction of the aspects of class, materiality and embodiment as intertwined within an analysis of gender oppression.²¹ It helps to locate structural conditions and social ties, such as kinship, marriage and sexuality (Luxton, 2006, p. 31), at the centre of the analysis of single motherhood and everyday struggles, providing a framework that doesn't

²⁰ Paper presentation by Lise Vogel (2015). 18:57 min of the video [Viewed on 20 April 2020]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjfV9I_dHVI.

²¹ Going deeper into capitalist relations and wage economy, Federici explains how the wage for waged work serves as an illusion, a false impression of a fair deal, while in reality, she states, the wage one gets, rather than being paid for the work one does, only hides the unpaid work that goes into profit (Federici, 2012, p. 16). The wage work is part of our social contract and the condition under which we are allowed to live.

separate gender and class. SRT is a useful tool for combining those two categories and centring women's historically situated and empirically grounded experiences of oppression.²²

Precarity, precariousness and precarisation

The theorising of precarity is equally central to this study. When trying to grasp the meaning of the concept, it is important to note that, thinking globally and structurally, precarity has been more of a norm (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). The term precarity hit the global North and Western academia after political and industrial restructuring in the early 1990s, which were followed by financial world crises; the result of this being that “no longer [was] precarity delegated to the poor or the *sans-papiers*” (Berlant, 2011, p. 19). When not only highly precarious migrants, but also self-employed, mobile and flexible professionals started experiencing increasing instability and unpredictability of work, it led to a re-examination of the term *precarity*. Declining social mobility has been seen as one of the characteristics of what came to be called the *precariat* – a dangerous emerging class (Standing, 2011).

Although several studies have identified precarity as an important topic among Western millennials (McRobbie, 2011; Worth, 2016), the problems with a flexible, insecure, casualised work-force have been long theorised in relation to a host of other phenomena, including post-industrial transformations, a diminishing middle class and increasing flows of labour migration, and the shift to an “information society” (Tsianos & Papadopoulos, 2006); “immaterial labour” (Lazzarato, 2010; Virno, 2004; Berardi, 2007); as well as the formation of “the creative class” and “the cognitariat” (Standing, 2011; Ross, 2009). I side with those scholars who theorise precarity as something structural, going hand-in-hand with neoliberalism, and characterised by a new subjectivity guided by uncertainty, worry, anger, competition, alienation and self-discipline (Standing, 2011; McRobbie, 2011; Berlant, 2011; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013).

Numerous researchers see *precariousness*, *precarity* and *precarization* as a “novel territory for thinking – and intervening in – labour and life” (Gill &

²² Although more than 30 years past since Lithuania regained independence, academic discourse has remained rather reluctant to engage in Marxist analyses. Lithuanian sociologist Professor Artūras Tereškinas argues that while Soviet rule has deeply affected relationships and livelihoods of the Lithuanian people, continuing to put the blame exclusively on the Soviet past and the traumas it produced redirects our attention away from alternative analyses and possible solutions. Tereškinas is calling for a more active engagement, mobilisation and a collective push for changes in “big” politics, demanding eradication of poverty, rejection of the culture of stigmatisation and bullying. (See Jackevičius, 2017).

Pratt, 2008, p. 3). While these terms are parts of the same puzzle, each of them has a slightly different meaning and scope. While *precarity* can be seen as an obstacle, as structural discrimination, and as changeable in relation to conditions of protection and care, *precariousness* typically refers, in a Butlerian sense, to a socio-ontological condition of the impossibility of a completely autonomous life and invulnerability, which is shared by all humans (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Lorey, 2017). According to Butler (2004, p. 48–49), precariousness is an ontological condition of each and every one of us, which involves inevitable interconnectedness, the construction of subjectivity and the recognition of ourselves through each other – a condition of being exposed to each other and co-dependent. Despite its universality, what is undeniable is that precariousness manifests itself differently for different individuals and groups in relation to their geographical and socio-political locations.

The concept of *governmental precarisation* is an extension of Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality and biopolitics, developed by German theorist Isabel Lorey (2015, 2017) as part of a political theory of precarisation. What Lorey sees as systemic precarisation can be described as a situation where “the state does not on principle limit freedom or combat insecurity, but both become the ideological precondition for governmental precarization” (Lorey, 2015, p. 64). Importantly, she claims that “the conduct of state governance and individualized self-governance are intertwined in a mode of governing that uses insecurity as its main tool” (Lorey, 2017, p. 200).

Crisis of production, crisis of social reproduction²³

Here, by way of an overview of theoretical approaches, I want to establish the connection between social reproduction and precarity. According to Meehan and Strauss (2015), “[s]ocial reproduction [...] provides a framework for examining the interaction of paid labor and unpaid work in the reproduction of bodies, households, communities, societies, and environments and the ways in which these activities are organized to support – or undermine – human flourishing” (Meehan & Strauss, 2015, p. 1). Indeed, the interdependence of these two spheres – that of paid labour and that of unpaid labour – ultimately determines one’s living conditions: precarious life and precarious work mutually contribute to women’s subordination and their further oppression (ibid).

²³ This title is borrowed from Ching Kwan Lee and Yelizavetta Kofman (2012).

Isabel Lorey (2017) goes beyond Butler's understanding of innate vulnerability and, hence, fundamental interdependency, and highlights the political significance of the reproductive work upon which our vulnerability and precarious life is crucially dependent (Lorey, 2017, p. 19). Recent structural changes in the global work-force and the reoccurring crises in global capitalism (e.g., the global financial crisis of 2008 and the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020), function like a magnifying glass, revealing the loopholes in the system, the inequalities and the traps that entire social groups – women, precarious workers or single mothers – are likely to get caught in (Korolczuk, 2020). Austerity measures expose systemic capital – rather than human – friendly decisions and the indispensability of reproductive labour that is automatically relegated to the private sphere. “By systematically privatizing previously socialized resources and reducing the quality of services, capital has aimed to make the work of daily regeneration more vulnerable and precarious while simultaneously unloading the entire responsibility and discourse of reproduction onto individual families” (Bhattacharya, 2017c, p. 90).

Shrinking welfare provisions around the world and increased flexibilisation of working contracts and conditions serve to reveal just how much emotional work women perform without any acknowledgment or enumeration. Taking responsibility, shouldering anxiety, smoothing out tensions and providing validation are part of the broader realm of reproductive labour. However, according to Johanna Brenner (2000, p. 16), a capitalist system is not ready to sacrifice its profits in order to create an infrastructure of care, where gender would lose its importance, precisely because “capitalism perpetuates rather than undermines gender division”. Domestic work – an unpaid women's labour – is seen as one of the primary mechanisms that allows for capitalism to get going (Federici, 2008; 2012). The reproduction of labour power depends largely upon women's (house)work, which is needed to transform commodities into sustenance for the worker.

A growing attention to Social Reproduction Theory demonstrates that the problem of the gendered responsibility for reproductive labour – labour which is indeed unavoidable and socially necessary – has yet to be resolved (Bhattacharya, 2017a; Federici, 2017; Fergusson, 2020; Newberry & Rosen, 2020). Largely unwaged or under-waged, invisibilised and retraditionalised, the reproductive labour performed by women keeps “stabilizing and absorbing precarious livelihoods” (Newberry & Rosen, 2020, p. 113). It is women who shoulder the biggest impact of an increased precarisation that has crossed all the boundaries, both geographical and in terms of class.

An illustrative example, both in terms of activism and theoretical discussions, is the work of the feminist initiative *Precarias a la Deriva* (2006, p. 39), which has been directing its efforts towards rupturing the logics of security and insecurity, both on macro and micro levels. “The logic of security founds itself in fear, concretizes itself in practices of containment, and generates isolation that persists in present social problems as individual ones” (Precarias, 2006, p. 40). Being in a state of constant uncertainty, not only about paid work, but also about who is there to care for us, urges us to defy the securitary logic by “enhancing the value of care, both at the individual level and at the level of society” (Lorey, 2017, p. 206). The term “care” is thus placed in contradiction with the liberal (state) citizenship and intends to break the separation of the public/private divide, the gender specific division of labour and the separation between autonomy and dependency (Precarias, 2006; Casas-Cortés, 2014; Lorey, 2017). Radically changing the understanding of care, the Precarias (2006) collective argues that we should remove any moralistic elements from it, including any obligation of gratitude and sense of sacrifice, thus, eliminating victimisation, paternalism, supremacy and gender-based oppression. Only then can the relations embedded in debt be removed (Newberry & Rosen, 2020). Instead of keeping all the care labour – both when managing a crisis or an everyday matter – domesticated and privatised, we should relocate it into the centre and announce it as a public matter (Precarias, 2006, p. 43).

This thesis, then, is grounded within the theoretical framework of Social Reproduction Theory, which (1) draws the attention to labour and acknowledges both kinds of it – paid work and unpaid reproductive work – as “part of the same socio-economic process” (Luxton, 2006, p. 37); (2) aims at revealing and destabilising the gender specific and heteronormative distinction between production and reproduction; and (3) analyses the aspects of structural precarity and centralises care.

Thinking the post-socialist semi-periphery

Lithuania, as well as other Baltic countries, is usually put in the same basket of post-socialist or post-Soviet countries, a so-called *Eastern European Block*, which commonly refers to the geographical term that includes all post-socialist European countries (Aidukaitė, 2004). After 50 years under Soviet rule, all those countries experienced similar processes when trying to strike a balance between a suddenly extinct authoritarian leadership and the new unforeseen “wilderness” of a market economy. Massive privatisation, high

inflation and growing rates of unemployment, as well as rapid economic and social transformation are common characteristics of the region. In this section, I will present the theoretical perspectives I rely on in terms of semi-peripheral situatedness. I will attend to the questions of political and economic inequalities (lack of authority, material stability, continuous production and extraction of resources, and cheap labour power for the centre) as well as the issues of conceptualisation of one's identity, belonging and accountability. Also, I will draw on political economy, border, and semi-peripheral theorising as well as decolonial thinking. In other words, I will engage alternative ways of theorising than what has been prescribed by Western ideas of modernity, linearity and evolutionary development (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Blagojević, 2009; Tlostanova, 2010; Shapiro, 2014).

Border thinking

By utilising terms in my thesis such as “post-socialist”, “Eastern” or “East European”, I would inevitably – albeit unintentionally – evoke and suggest some type of “backwardness”, a discourse of “lagging behind” and “catching up”, which is all too often naturalised and incorporated, not only into national and regional politics and rhetoric, but also into academic work (Cerwonka, 2008; Todorova, 1997/2009; Wolff, 1994; Bucur, 2008; Navickaitė, 2014; Kaneva, 2015). Therefore, first of all, I attempt to remain reflexive and explicitly note how the East-West divide and labels such as “Central Eastern European” and “post-communist” are used “as a technique aimed at rendering CEE as the ‘other’” (Mizielńska & Kulpa, 2011, p. 17). Secondly, I’m cognisant of how such labels and practices of othering serve to maintain silences or feelings of invisibility (Koobak, 2020, p. 174). Thirdly, this thesis is also a sustained attempt to go beyond the East-West divide, following the path of some recent feminist and decolonial scholars who have done so convincingly (Boatcă, 2016; Tlostanova, 2010; 2012b).

According to Maria Todorova (1997/2009), many historical examples have demonstrated how othering ensued in various contexts and an East-West divide was sustained within Europe. As she notes, by being geographically inextricable from Europe, and at the same time (predominantly) Christian and white, the European Southeast is constructed not as an “absolute other” or an “incomplete other”, but as an “incomplete self” (Todorova, 1997/2009, pp. 18, 188). The same can be said about the European East, which is not different enough to be fully “othered”, and hence, it is similarly theorised as an “internal other” or an “incomplete self” (Wolff,

1994; Todorova, 1997/2009; Blagojević, 2009; Tlostanova, 2010; Boatcă, 2006b; 2016).

As an academic from Lithuania, I have experienced such rendering not so much as an encountering of structural boundaries, but more as an inner position of inferiority and incompetence. One of the natural ways that both post-colonial and post-Soviet intellectuals come to see themselves is as occupying “a subordinate position vis-à-vis the centres of knowledge production and dissemination in the West” (Todorova, 2010, p. 189). In terms of cultural and knowledge production, the years of colonisation (or Sovietisation) have arguably left many of us with a sense of “temporal lag” (Todorova, 2005, p. 145) that represents a perspective from the outside, as well as a “perpetual lament of self-victimization” (Todorova, 2010, p. 181) and “auto-stereotyping” (Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 10). While such trends are definitely recognisable, this thesis will focus less on collective trauma from the Soviet past, and more so on current trends of material dispossession and precarity as the more important factors in limiting opportunities and producing wounded subjectivities (*see* Tereškinas, 2009; 2015).

I agree with Madina Tlostanova’s (2014)²⁴ view that as post-socialist people – and especially post-socialist women – we are often desperately trying to cross the “seemingly transparent but in fact much more impenetrable boundaries, in the strange capacity of the new subalterns who are longing yet are never able to belong, remaining forever marked with a peculiar double consciousness of being too same to be real others for the West and too different to be fully accepted”. At the peripheries, such things happen quietly and without much uproar. The narratives of being “slightly off, a little late, out of sync”, as Redi Koobak (2013, p. 31) poetically puts it in her discussion on feminist imaginaries and visual art in Estonia, are easily internalised. Because the road that leads towards a seemingly more developed and in every way “better Western Europe” is often not only the only one available but also the most desirable one. The discourse of linearity and progress has been an important one in the lives of many women in the post-socialist peripheries who have lived in the mode of development and catching up with the centre (Mohanty, 1988, 2013; Havelková, 1993, Šiklová & Radzai, 1993; Grabowska, 2012; Kováts, 2016).

²⁴ Madina Tlostanova (2014). *Postsocialist subject as a new other: global coloniality, border thinking and decolonial option*. University of Oxford Podcast. (Listened on 20 March 2015). Available from: <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/postsocialist-subject-new-other-global-coloniality-border-thinking-and-decolonial-option>.

While the discourse of “the West against the rest” has been significant, especially in the development of Black feminist thought and postcolonial studies, rather than making some manner of “nostalgic return” (Kulawik 2020, p.21), I intend to systemically rethink how the region is viewed, emphasizing it as one imbedded within global frictions and interconnectedness. Following the political economy perspective, I situate my research within the scholarship that theorises region-building, similarly to nation-building, as “a project of elites in the struggle for resources, it is an enterprise driven forward by actors with collective material and immaterial interests, not something materialized by history” (Götz, 2003, p. 325). Without essentialising difference, I examine the particularities of place by actively acknowledging the political and historical aspects of difference making from the perspective of political economy and a macro-scale theorising. Here I side with researchers who stress global inequalities and go beyond simplistic visions of a bipolar world order, centring discussions of power, global (and local) economic inequalities, and questions of labour force and subsistence as imbedded in the colonial and imperial world project (Boatcă, 2006a; 2016).

Taking the path of Maria Mies (1986/2014), Manuela Boatcă (2016), Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo (2012a), and Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko (eds., 2020), I stand with the scholarly tradition that effectively combines colonial and decolonial thinking with post-socialist theorising. In that, I find the metaphor of *borderlands* quite useful, as it goes beyond the East-West divide and challenges that binary opposition by remaking the cartographies of Europeaness and making space for more nuanced analyses (Kulawik, 2020, p.3). Perhaps, the scholars from (semi-)peripheries, as well as their theories, will remain perceived as a mere copy of the original, as perpetually catching up; however, this state can subsist only so long as the power asymmetries exist, remain untheorised and unproblematised. While Western theory and prevailing discourses of modernity need to be examined and decentred (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Kulawik, 2020; Koobak, 2020), my contribution to this decentring stems from my post-socialist positionality, not as oppositional, but as complimentary. I situate my research within decolonial and borderland studies (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999), which allows me to analyse micro scale ethnographic data through the lens of multiple entanglements of power (Tlostanova et al., 2016) without juxtaposing the post-socialist region to the “advanced” West.

Decolonial perspective as a window of opportunity

Against the backdrop of ongoing debates about whether post-socialist countries can be analysed as post-colonial, I find it useful to reflect upon the concepts of *coloniality*, *coloniality of knowledge* and *coloniality of thinking*. *Coloniality*, a term coined by Anibal Quijano, refers to “a full dependence of the models of thinking, making, and interpreting the world on the norms, created and imposed by/in Western modernity” (Tlostanova et. al., 2019, p. 1). Even though this concept originates in and deeply relies upon the struggles of autochthonous peoples²⁵ in the Global South and their resistance against colonialism, in my thesis the term specifically refers to modes of thinking, knowing and being. Rather than focusing primarily on colonialism in geo-political and economic terms, the concept of coloniality here means power relations reproduced in/by “culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production [...]. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243).

Indeed, as several theorists from Eastern Europe observe, coloniality often leads to mimicry, erasure, assimilation, danger of losing the capacity for critical vision and feelings of invisibility (Baločkaitė, 2012; Tlostanova, 2010, 2012, 2014; Koobak, 2020). While *global colonialism* can be understood as a model of power relations that does not cease to exist with the end of empire, but is embedded in further knowledge production, a *decolonial framework* offers an “epistemic, political, and ethical basis for global decolonial options in the existing world order” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 17). It suggests, among other things, that we must learn to *unlearn* and get rid of the indoctrinations and “thinking programs imposed on us by education, culture, and social environment” (ibid, p. 7). *Denaturalisation* of generally accepted concepts (Tlostanova, 2010, p. 30) and *disidentification* (Koobak, 2013, p. 75) could be seen as moves toward processes of decolonisation.

However, along with the practices of unlearning, a new learning takes place, helping to make a shift from the rhetoric of sorrow and criticism to that of acknowledgment and affirmation. Inspired by Colombian *artist*²⁶ Adolfo Alban, Madina Tlostanova (2010) argues that we should move gradu-

²⁵ *Autochthonous peoples* who live in a particular place and whose ancestors all came from the same place; indigenous rather than descended from migrants or colonists.

²⁶ Artist + activist = activist

ally forward from criticism and negation to finding our own ways of being and of affirming difference, uniqueness and legitimacy. Through carefully moving in this manner, we shall move towards non-racist, non-sexist and non-patriarchal futures that entail a way of “resistance to re-existence”, a way towards emancipation, epistemically, politically, and culturally (Tlostanova, 2010, p. 29; Tlostanova et.al, 2019, p. 1).

Importantly, in order to try out new forms of resistance, as Blogajević (2009) suggests, we need to (re)claim our voices and legitimate our standpoints as visible, valid, important and knowledgeable. In other words, we need to reflect upon which concepts and knowledges are imported, which observations take the stance of “the outside” and are seen through the eyes of others, which definitions imply “they-ness” rather than “we-ness” (Ringer and Lawless, 1989, cited in Blogajević, 2009, p. 57). We also need to start co-producing knowledge with research participants “within the sites of alterity and multiplicity” (Tlostanova et.al., 2019, p. 2) and to tell *our own* stories in *our own* languages, ways, genres and paces, without seeking approval and without looking at ourselves from the outsider’s point of view. I argue for the importance of our own theoretical and epistemic standpoint.

Operationalisation of concepts

Neoliberalism

My understanding of neoliberalism draws on that of David Harvey (2005) and Aihwa Ong (2006), emphasising both the actual political framework – neoliberal democracy with its unregulated or loosely regulated markets – as well as neoliberal governmentality and self-monitoring, practices of responsabilisation and self-maximisation.

Therefore, neoliberalism refers to a political-economic rationality that allows private capital and a free-market economy to take over previously state-owned and regulated key sectors, such as national industries, state-owned property and state-led planning. As David Harvey (2005, pp. 5, 40–41) illustrates in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, such neoliberal projects have succeeded in detaching capital from state-regulated constraints by using the rhetoric of sacrosanct individual freedoms or, alternatively, by pure force. It also refers to *neoliberal* as governmentality in Foucauldian terms as well as one that optimises technologies, which Aihwa Ong (2006) calls *technologies of subjectivity*. These technologies “rely on an array of knowledge and expert systems to induce self-animation and self-government so that citizens can optimise choices, efficiency, and competitiveness in

turbulent market conditions” (Ong, 2006, p. 6). Such individualised approaches to precarious conditions are, in fact, encouraged by various techniques of self-engineering, self-preservation, and capital accumulation as well as the extension of the market-logic to other areas of life (Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006).

Precarity and precariousness

I use the terms *precarity* and *precarious living* in a manifold manner. Firstly, I interpret them economically, referring largely to material wellbeing. *Precarity*, then, is a structurally defined condition of existence without security or predictability, habituation to expecting a life of unstable labour and unstable living as a permanent condition rather than as deriving from individualised circumstances or a temporary lack of luck (Standing, 2011; Ross, 2009). Following Berardi (2007), I consider whether a loss of certain social securities and a permanent state of insecurity bring people to systemic *depolitisation* (Berardi, 2007, p. 13).

Secondly, I rely on Judith Butler and use the terms *precarious* and *precariousness* to describe a shared human condition of vulnerability and interdependence (Butler, 2004; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). I use the concept of *precariousness* to highlight the intersections of gender, feminised labour and power(lessness) by investigating daily realities of doubly precarious single mothers.

Thirdly, I use the term of *governmental precarisation*, as defined by Isabel Lorey (2015; 2017), which refers to a tool of governing through precarisation. Contextualised in a post-socialist region, my study reveals the governmental processes of reducing welfare, restructuring collective safeguarding systems and state support, putting everyone under the necessity of individualised self-management, private risk-assessment and responsabilisation. In this way, by governmental precarisation, “the fear of precariousness has an individualising effect and enhances governability within the framework of neoliberal governmentality” (Lorey 2017, p. 204).

Class

Class matters, but how, precisely, does it matter when we talk about precarity within the post-socialist context?²⁷ In my work, *class* is used as a relational

²⁷ After 1989, in the post-socialist region, as David Ost (2015) observes, the term “class” disappeared from any discourse and was instead swapped by such sociological terms as “hierarchy”, “social stratification” or, simply put, – “inequalities”. “Class” in Lithuania has been literally unutterable, except when the concern was

concept, “interlocking exploitative, extractive, uneven, and constantly transformative relational antagonisms” (Kalb, 2015, p. 16). It is a concept tied to social and economic inequality, gender and social reproduction. To be more precise, I conceptualise *class* following Silvia Federici (2004), without disconnecting it from gender. According to her, “if ‘femininity’ has been constituted in capitalist society as a work-function masking the production of the workforce under the cover of a biological destiny, then ‘women’s history’ is ‘class history’, and the question that has to be asked is whether the sexual division of labour that has produced that particular concept has been transcended” (Federici, 2004, p. 14). The answer to this question, as of now, seems to be *no*. Therefore, I will treat “woman” as an analytical tool to access the meaning of class, by looking at the organisation of reproductive labour (*ibid*).

Using a contemporary Marxist feminist standpoint as a point of departure (Vogel, Federici, Bhattacharya), I will also draw on a definition of class that “(1) begins from human experience, (2) recognizes the all-constitutive nature of labour, and (3) defetishizes capitalist social relations [thus avoiding] the problems of a theory of society that starts with objectified structures and fetishized forms of appearance”. (Camfield, 2002, p. 49). Therefore, my understanding of class is tied to people’s biographies and intergenerational histories that reveal downward social mobility, despite the fuzziness of class boundaries through their own interpretation and articulation of the situations. Second, I will stay close to a Marxist definition of class, where the class position is directly tied to property ownership and dispossession, making an obvious differentiation between those who own substantial property and those who do not (Palmer, 2014; Kalb, 2015). Third, in seeing class not *in relation to* gender, but, rather, *as part of* gender, I agree with the inseparability of both oppressions and both struggles in a “daily and generational reproduction of labour-power” (Camfield, 2002, p. 47). Women are classed by way of performing most of the unpaid reproductive labour, which, in fact, produces society and its entire labour force (Camfield, 2002; Bhattacharya, 2017a; Federici, 2012).

Care

The concept of *care* is central to this study. A rather conventional equation of *motherhood* with *care and affective labour* is a problematic one that needs to be examined in several ways. First, I want to stress the labour dimension

with the middle class, “a vague concept signalling the prosperity and stability promised, but far from realised, by the postcommunist project” (Ost, 2015, p. 557).

of care. As suggested by feminist researchers from Federici (1975) to Vogel (1983/2013), and from Fraser (2016) to Bhattacharya (2017b), care is largely unpaid and invisible labour. It is an exhausting, time and energy consuming activity that requires a lot of attention and subtle social skills. It is not merely a mechanical work, but one that often requires affective and emotional components to build intimacy and relationships (Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Federici, 2012).²⁸ It is rather common that caregivers provide support, encouragement, openness, attention and communication (Milligan & Wiles, 2010, p. 738), especially, in terms of motherhood.

The second problematic aspect of care, as traditionally understood, relates directly to the previous one, as the work of caregiving tends to be continuously essentialised and largely feminised. Such an ideological belief, that care is best given by women, maintains a patriarchal, unequal division of labour with higher valorisation of waged work, the unequal (re)distribution of resources, and is tied to androcentrism, nuclear family norms and capitalism (Fraser, 2009, p. 102; Milligan & Wiles, 2010, p. 739; Federici, 2012; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014b, p. 45).

Third, I want to stress the deep contradictions embedded in the concept of care in the financialised neoliberal capitalism of our time, as theorised by Nancy Fraser (2016) and Silvia Federici (2012). It is important to emphasise that the tension between economic production and social reproduction has increased with the expansion of the progressive neoliberal paradigm “which celebrates ‘diversity’, meritocracy and ‘emancipation’ while dismantling social protections and re-externalizing social reproduction” (Fraser, 2016, p. 113). The crisis of care can be located in such a contradiction, which is produced by capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation and massive financial cuts as well as to austerity measures of social services. Despite being absolutely indispensable, care work and affective labour is continuously neglected, not paid for and externalised onto families and communities, which reduces people’s capacity to perform it well and thus destabilises not only the sphere of social reproduction, but also of capitalist production (Fraser, 2016, pp. 100, 104; Federici, 2012, pp. 69, 86, 117). Moreover, with its current trend towards entrepreneurial individualism, which is highly

²⁸ An important movement in this context is the historical campaign *Wages for housework*, which was established in 1972 in Italy before spreading internationally. It was based upon a revolutionary perspective that exposed the root cause of “women’s oppression” in a capitalist society, revealing the entire spectrum of spheres of human activity that were devalued and hidden under the myth of feminine nature. This revolutionary campaign advocated the remuneration for housework as one of the material ways to challenge the system of inequality and precarity of women (Federici, 2012).

competitive and applauds self-interest as natural and desirable, neoliberalism is deeply antithetical to care. Care, then, within the neoliberal paradigm, is both the activity that sustains life and a tool for maintaining gender and class oppression.

Family

This dissertation offers a critical view on the institution of the nuclear family, understood as a heteronormative, patriarchal institution that emerged with capitalism and the division between market and the domestic, private sphere. I will therefore operationalise this term in its multidimensional way. First, I engage in the exploration of oppression through the concept of *the family*, by which the reproduction of a heteronormative gender system is maintained. As feminists identified early on, drawing on an anthropological theorising (Rubin, 1975), one of the specific ways to organise social reproduction has been through the idea of heterosexuality with a particular gendered division of labour, where women were assigned to the sphere of social reproduction and the care work that it entails (Mies, 1986/2014; Brenner, 2000; Federici, 2012). Such a division of labour is tied to the system of kinship and marriage and is embedded in the economic and political order (Rubin, 1975, p. 207). Only those men who had some property could afford to have a “family”; thus, the nuclear family retains strong connotations of both class and heterosexuality.²⁹

Second, I use the notion of *family* to also refer to a rich history about domestication of women and their subjugation to the sphere of social reproduction, as producers of love and care, as perfect wives and as sacrificing mothers. During the 19th – 20th centuries, alongside the processes of colonisation of lands and women in Africa and Asia, “civilisation” and “domestication” of women within the colonial centres also took place, establishing the woman’s role as a *mother* and a *housewife* within a heterosexual family. Even after introducing the idea of love as a “free” negotiation between autonomous partners (who commit to the relationship not necessarily in terms of an economic contract), the economic order built upon gender subordination

²⁹ According to David Graeber (2011, p. 201), the word *familia* derives from the word *famulus*, meaning a “slave”; whereas the word *dominium* is derived from *dominus*, meaning “master” or “slave-owner”, but ultimately from *domus*, meaning “house” or “household”. It’s of course related to the English term “domestic”, which even now can be used either to mean “pertaining to private life”, or to refer to a servant who cleans the house (Graeber, 2011, p. 201). According to Maria Mies (1986/2014, p. 104), “family”, as we know it today – a combination of co-residence and blood relationship based on the patriarchal principle – was an invention of the bourgeoisie.

has not been erased (Kováts, 2015; Fraser, 2017). This economic order has been sustained by factors of heteronormative ideology that relegate and prescribe care and affection primarily to women; while perhaps no longer confined within the walls of domesticity, women remain confined to the emotional and affective labour in the political economy of heterosexual intimacy (Dowling, 2016).

Third, being an institution of governance, the family is also a site of resistance and counterhegemonic struggles, connecting pioneers of women's resistance to the contemporary practices of knowledge production and care (Mies, 1986/2014; Federici, 2004).³⁰ In terms of my research, *family* acts as a nodal point of economic, political and cultural systems, spheres of production and reproduction, and which has remained a challenging theme for re-addressing the matters of social justice, love, care, solidarity and social creativity.

Method and primary sources

I conducted extensive, continuous ethnographic fieldwork in Lithuania between September 2016 and September 2017. I also conducted a shorter visit back to Lithuania, in the winter and spring 2018, to continue the work. Two main research methods were used during these visits: participant observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews. In this section, I will describe the methodology, methods, material, and research participants as well as the researcher's positionality and reflexivity.

Entering the field – locating research participants

I had the best setting that an ethnographer could dream of, a limited space and seemingly unlimited time, which allowed me to explore, make connections and start collaborations. Determined to engage in feminist activist research by way of ethnography (which I will present shortly), I kept engaging in already existing feminist activities, volunteering at a day-care centre, co-organising cultural events in the district of Šančiai in Kaunas together with local artists and community workers, and co-creating spaces that had the potential for counter-hegemonic thought and feminist knowledge pro-

³⁰ According to historical accounts (Mies 1986/2014; Federici 2004), the history of witch-hunting in the 12th – 17th centuries might provide some insights about precursors of early feminist resistance and the power of patriarchal order. Women who had autonomously organised in a communal living, outside the marriage and the authority of church, showed their form of resistance against sexual repression, monogamy, lack of property rights and against actually being someone's property (Mies 1986/2014, p. 81).

duction (Cooper, 2014). Together with a friend, I established the first-ever samba band of women drummers in Kaunas, called “Bombo Feminista”, which has been invited to a number of protests and cultural events since.³¹ Our group took part in events, such as *Kaunas School of Spectacle*³² and *Šančių Paradas 2017*³³, and in several feminist, LGBTQ and human rights’ protests and camps, where ideas and experiences of how to mobilise communities and support each other were exchanged in a diverse international environment. For over twelve months, I was actively participating in knowledge production by giving talks and attending reading groups, exchanging ideas in conversations and performances, taking part in music playing and dancing sessions, through meditations and communal praying, cooking and sewing, banner making and stencil cutting, protesting and striking, exchanging second-hand children’s clothing and establishing channels of communication.

Primary sources and research participants

As for audio-recorded material, 13 semi-structured interviews were recorded in Lithuanian with single mothers in and around Kaunas using an application for audio recording on my smart phone. All women in my study were well-educated and identified as heterosexual cis women.³⁴ They had university degrees across a variety of fields (arts, social and political sciences, humanities, natural sciences and medicine). Nine of the women had a MA degree and four of the women a BA. Most of the women were in their 30s, although

³¹ “Bombo Feminista” is one of the ongoing collaborative projects between the Lithuanian left and the feminist movement. Becoming part of the international *Rhythms of Resistance* network and removing gender-based exclusion, the group has continued developing in collaborative, non-hierarchical and ethically informed ways. Some examples of public participation include the following: International Women’s Day (IWD) on the March 8, 2018 in Vilnius (Retrieved March 9, 2018, from: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/eityniu-organizatores-tokios-lietuvos-dukroms-nepaliksim-pokyciai-beldziasi.d?id=77367629>); IWD on March 8, 2019 in Vilnius (Retrieved March 10, 2019, from: <https://www.15min.lt/galerija/kovo-8-osios-solidarumo-eitynes-visos-moterys-dirba-bet-ne-visoms-moka-173294#>); IWD on March 8, 2020 in Kaunas (Retrieved March 9, 2020, from: <https://kauno.diena.lt/naujienos/kaunas/miesto-pulsas/eitynes-kaune-sieke-atkreipti-demesi-i-smurta-pries-moteris-956229>).

³² *Kaunas School of Spectacle* was a free five-day intensive outdoor arts training school for Creative Practitioners based in and around Kaunas, Lithuania, that engaged local and international artists and community workers. The school delivered training designed to build skills that creatives need for making outdoor events and civic celebrations. Retrieved May 15, 2018, from: <http://walktheplank.co.uk/kaunas-school-spectacle/>.

³³ The grand parade *Šančių paradas Kėdė* took place on 16 September 2017 in the district of Šančiai in Kaunas, one of the poorest districts of the city, however, recently undergoing the processes of gentrification. As titles in the news suggested after the parade, it was “a colourful event with details of protest” (Retrieved May 5, 2018, from: <http://kaunas.kasvyksta.lt/2017/09/16/laisvalaikis/neb-sancines/>).

³⁴ The term *cis-woman* refers to a female whose gender identity matches the sex she was assigned at birth.

the actual age range spanned from 25 to 60 years of age. Despite age differences, common variables were that all of the women were well-educated single mothers, fully or partially sustaining themselves and their children financially, even in cases where some or all of the children were already adults. All research participants were either employed, self-employed (freelancers) or on maternity leave during the interviews.

The interviews lasted between 46 minutes and 4.5 hours long and were mostly recorded during my fieldwork between September 2016 and August 2017. Two of the interviews were conducted in 2018, while one interview was recorded through Skype in late autumn of 2017. The conversations usually started by my asking general questions about the person being interviewed – who are they, what is their profession, how many children do they have, how do they support themselves, what helps them to navigate their daily realities? As semi-structured interviews tend to derail from the envisioned trajectory, our conversations took various turns, leading to topics that were of importance to the research participants. Often, a lot of attention was paid to the practices of care and self-care.

I interviewed each woman once, except for two of the research participants, who were interviewed twice. One research participant didn't agree to be recorded, while a second could not be recorded because of technical problems. In both cases, I received their permission to reconstruct our conversations in my field notes. However, it is important to emphasise that it was never only a matter of a one time-interview, but rather a process of establishing connection and trust. Most of the material for this study was collected by participant observation, which was documented in my fieldnote diary, immediately after each encounter. I also recorded reflective notes for myself while being immersed in the fieldwork, throughout the duration of my research. After my return to Sweden, the interviews and field notes were transcribed, translated, coded and analysed. I coded the interviews and field notes by assigning original categories and sub-categories, which, later, were developed into analytical chapters and different sections.

Regarding the selection of research participants, I used sampling based on two main criteria: they had to be single mothers and hold a higher education degree (at least a bachelor's degree). In addition, none of the women could have a stable income and/or an adequate job (given their level of education).

My research was guided by genuine inquiry, a series of semi-deliberate detours and serendipities (Martínez, 2018, pp. 1–2), as is often the case in anthropological research. A snowball sampling method proved to be effective in finding new participants. "Snowballing" is often used in finding research

participants from more socially sensitive or hidden groups. For instance, Kath Browne (2005) uses this method to recruit her research participants, non-heterosexual women, who are still not validated by the society (pp. 47–48), while Duncan and Edwards (1999) employ it for their research on lone mothers in the UK. Similarly, women for my research were found either through serendipitous encounters or via personal networks.

It is important to stress that my research required closeness and trust (Ellis, 1999). The conversations and engagements I had with the research participants required humility in listening as the topics often centred around daily problem solving, disappointments, dreams and ruptures. Two of the women in my study were previously my friends. Connections with all the other participants first occurred during this research, either by common friends (snowball method) or common activities in one of the aforementioned events and circles.

Methodology: feminist activist ethnography of everyday life

In order to answer my research questions and understand the lives of well-educated single mothers in Lithuania, I chose ethnography. As an ethnographer, I followed my interest in lived experiences, everyday lives and embodied stories that were yet to be told. The questions I asked were down to earth: *What is your daily life like? What helps and what obstructs your daily wellbeing? How do you support yourself? What kind of future do you envision for you and your children?*

By definition, “[e]thnography is an eclectic methodological choice which privileges an engaged, contextually rich and nuanced type of qualitative social research, in which fine grained daily interactions constitute the lifeblood of the data produced” (Falzon, 2009, p. 1).³⁵ Ethnography proves to be fruitful in providing “detailed (thick) description of a particular context” and developing “theoretical insights from the empirical material in relation to existing theories and other studies” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 117). Ethnography also proves to be suitable for centring women’s experiences and (critically) examining post-socialist livelihoods (Ghodsee, 2011; Gemzöe, 2010; Lindqvist, 2015). Influenced by contemporary ethnographers who connect the local with the global in micro situations (Tsing, 2005; Ingridsdotter, 2017; Eriksson, 2018), I chose ethnography as my primary method.

³⁵ Here I would like to articulate my fundamental standpoint as an ethnographer: the “facts” or “data” are not simply there, waiting to be discovered and recorded. The “reality” that I “discover” during the fieldwork is being constructed simultaneously with that “discovering” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 171), partially and subjectively (Ellis, 1999, p. 673).

I rely on works by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007), Hughes & Lury (2013) and Pink (2018), who all openly challenge the stiffness of method and the disciplining of the disciplines by guarding their borders. In my research, I aim for more creative re-imagining and re-configuring of methodologies, juggling them and mixing them in a “scavenger” manner (Halberstam, 1998, p. 13). Such a creative, improvisatory approach allowed immediacy and unpredictability to guide my ethnographic research. The ability to allow the process to transform my original questions and, through this, for me to learn how to ask better ones – what Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) call “improvisational flexibility” (p. 79) – provided my research with the flexibility of co-creation with the participants and the space for transformations. Following the feminist ethnographers Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis (2013), and in keeping with my own specific research sensibilities as well as the specific ethical considerations of this project, I rely upon *feminist activist ethnography*, which attempts to produce an accountable, collaborative, and transformative research linked to “a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study” (Craven & Davis, 2013, p. 5).

According to Sarah Pink (2012, p. 31), *everyday life* is a legitimate site of knowledge production that crosses disciplinary boundaries and invites us “to reflect on questions relating to the contexts and the methods we use for researching everyday life and activism. These include sensory aesthetics, the use of media, collaborative methods, the reflexivity of being in the everyday, and accounting for the ‘flow’ of everyday life...” I have examined daily life as a site of creativity, resilience, transformation and resistance. The practice of ethnographic research, for me, has been a matter of living, “a way of being in the world” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 178) with all of my senses and emotions fully present (Ellis, 1999, p. 672; Pink, 2012, p. 38).

Feminist activist ethnography seeks to locate and support any sort of (political) agency – actual or potential – manifested not only by collective bodily presence in public, but also by mundane acts of resistance that often take place unnoticed. As Sara Pink (2012, p. 4) notes, “[t]he everyday has tended to be associated with the mundane, the routine and the hidden or at least unnoticed”, whereas activism, has been commonly “linked to the public, explicit, explosive and sometimes even glamorous elements of political life”. In this thesis, I aim to investigate everyday life, places and situations with actual presence, committed to the idea that uninterrupted attention to each other and mutual care can serve as sites for agency and resistance. Kitchen

conversations, thus, can be as significant as public gatherings and assemblages.³⁶

Methodological sensibility: collaborative research techniques and mixed material

From the outset, I envisioned this study as a chance to collaborate and co-produce knowledge by way of feminist activist ethnography, using the techniques of collaborative research and sensory ethnography. Sarah Pink (2009, p. 59) argues “that a sensory ethnography should be based in a collaborative and participatory approach to research, which respects research participants and recognises that ethnography might have a role in the real world as well as in academia”. According to Luke Eric Lassiter (2005), any type of ethnography involves a certain level of collaboration, through engaging in the daily lives of communities and people we aim to study or work with, bearing an ethical responsibility and commitment to these people. However, collaborative ethnography takes another step toward working together as a joint intellectual effort. Relying on Lassiter (2005, p. 15), I aimed at “resituating collaborative practice at every stage of the ethnographic process, from fieldwork to writing and back again”.

Although the methodology of this study is not collaborative ethnography, I conducted this research using collaborative research techniques, well-grounded and validated by both feminist, queer researchers (Halberstam, 1998; Gal & Kligman, 2000; Dahl, 2010) as well as anthropologists (Lassiter, 2005; Holmes & Marcus, 2008; Reddy, 2008; Peacock, 2008; Schwartz & Lederman, 2011; Davis, 2013; Simaan, 2017; Pink, 2018). I have applied collaborative research tools not only by collectively engaging my research participants in various activities and discussions, but also by inviting them to be the first readers of my draft chapters, taking their feedback and opinion into consideration while editing my text. Their feedback has been invaluable, as they propelled me forward by inspiring me to doubt what I had previously taken for granted, to ask supplementary questions, to rephrase or reconsider. There were moments of true intellectual collaboration: receiving the research participants’ feedback on my already written texts produced additional insights and continued our shared engagement through further dynamic

³⁶ For example, *the March 8th Parade*, where several of my research participants took part for the first time in their lives.

conversations.³⁷ Conducting this research in a mode of constant collaboration has also helped me to stay truly accountable to my research participants.

In terms of additional material beyond that already discussed, I have used my own photographs of local artwork (produced by local activist and artists), a mixture of fiction, art and urban intervention. This adds to my intention to cross disciplinary boundaries and to locate this research in a growing tradition of decolonial studies (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Lugones, 2008, 2010; Koobak & Marling, 2014; Tlostanova, 2012b, 2017). As advocated by the “scavenger method” (Halberstam, 1998), such a mixture of media adds liveliness to my ethnographic landscape and breath to the city that my research participants dwell in. Fragments of visual and poetic material enable readers to produce their own interpretations and to go beyond the text using other senses.

Positionality and reflexivity

Originally from Lithuania myself, I have been living in and out of Kaunas since 1999. Knowing the city and having a network of friends and acquaintances gave me a well-informed view of the geopolitical and urban context, facilitated my entrance into the field and helped me to establish connections with research participants. However, I have kept leaving my home country to study or work abroad, coming back to Lithuania and Kaunas only sporadically for more than a decade (until I returned to Lithuania in 2018). As a result, I have found myself in an *in-between place*, neither fully belonging to my previous context nor fully detached from it. Neither an insider nor a true outsider. My position has become that of an *ambiguous outsider* (Lorde, 1993), not by my language or skin colour, but rather by my “Western education”, explicit and unpopular feminist identity and, at times, rather arrogant “bird’s-eye view” on local realities. And yet, I have felt more at home in Lithuania than, for example, in Sweden, in terms of language, cultural codes and my shared experiences of precarity.

Like any other researcher, I have been influenced by my own historical path, cultural situatedness and embodied knowledge, whereas my experiences have been implicated in my own knowledge production process. Acknowledging the impossibility of full and objective knowledge, I have constantly been looking for a multiplicity of perspectives that can give an in-

³⁷ For example, the puzzle about the intergenerational tensions in mother-daughter relationships (see Chapter 4) has mobilised my research participants towards collective thinking, reflecting, reading different material on the subject matter, sharing personal biographies and exchanging new insights with one another.

depth account of social reality. My researcher's positionality is one that considers knowledge as partial and always situated (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Following in the footsteps of Donna Haraway (1988), I argue in favour of the active researcher's position, which is imbedded in the results produced by way of research.

Sometimes, a simple object or specific encounter would awaken memories or cause a shift in perception, which helped me to understand social situations and their historical and geopolitical meaning. By being attentive to sensorial experiences, I have explored the intersection of perception, affect, place, memory and imagination. In this regard, my positionality, informed by sensorial ethnography (Pink 2009), proved to be valuable – not only in producing a certain depth, but also in writing this thesis from the position of being both a Lithuanian female researcher and a single mother.

Conducting this research has been an ongoing attempt to strike a balance between my roles as an academic researcher, a feminist activist and a mother. Taking an ethical feminist subject-position, I have been aware of existing power imbalances and have tried to acknowledge my privilege, which is not, according to Lann Hornscheidt (2015, p. 43), a moral condemnation but rather “a call to action that requires collective work in order to more evenly distribute access to power and to resources so that human agency can be reclaimed and claimed by all”. Immediately after entering my fieldwork, I had to acknowledge that I was privileged by my unmarked categories of race, ability, sexuality and – importantly – a temporary economic stability that my doctoral contract in Sweden provided me with.³⁸

Ethical considerations

While researching everyday life strategies among single mothers, I have, at times, touched upon sensitive topics, private aspects of personal lives and relationships. This raises ethical concerns, such as, how to anonymise my research participants in a medium-sized city, such as Kaunas is.

Following the *EU General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) (2016), *Good Research Practice* guidelines (2017) approved by the Swedish Research Council, as well as *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (2017), I conducted my research with respect for human dignity and integrity (Good Research Practice, 2017, pp. 31, 41), following the principles of fairness, transparency, accuracy, anonymity and accountability, among others.

³⁸ For more research on academic precarity and post-socialist positionality see Mariya Ivancheva (2013, 2018) and Lynch & Ivancheva (2015).

The collected material has been handled in accordance with the Data Protection Directive, which in Sweden has been implemented through the Personal Data Act (ibid, p. 74). I have stored the recorded interviews, transcriptions (both in Lithuanian and in English) and my ethnographic field notes (both in Lithuanian and in English) in a password protected folder, providing access to no one other than myself.³⁹

Before engaging with research participants, I clearly explained the purpose of this study, my research methodology, the potential risks that may arise for them and the benefits of their participation. Subjects in this study participated willingly, and their consent to participate in my research was given orally at the beginning of their participation and then re-confirmed both during and after the fieldwork. After having obtained oral consent from all the participants, I have ensured their anonymity and confidentiality by changing their names and by not providing their exact professions, age, places of residence or other identifiable information in any of my available oral or written accounts.⁴⁰ Protecting my research participants anonymity and confidentiality, and thus minimising the risk of possible harm to them, have been guiding principles throughout my research. I have also reminded the research participants, several times, that their participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without providing any reason for doing so. Open and clear communication has been part of the entire process, while the possibility of withdrawing, raising issues, questioning or objecting, at any stage, was guaranteed to the participants and clearly explained to them. No one, in fact, opted out.

Additionally, I have adhered to the guidelines of the *Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics* (2013), by conducting my research in the spirit of an engaged, ethical and sensitive study that is based on honesty and respect, closeness and trust (Ellis, 1999). Regardless of whether I would call it *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2009), or describe it as *delinking from colonial and totalitarian epistemology* (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 11) or as a form of *undisciplined discipline* (Pink 2018, p. 205), this research has earnestly been conducted in an ethical way from the start – it is not research *on* or *about* single mothers, but rather research done *with them* and *on their behalf*. As Dean Spade emphasised in their lecture in 2016, ethical scholarship

³⁹ I plan to store my research data in a password protected digital archive for 5 years after the publication of this dissertation. Afterwards, I will erase all the data.

⁴⁰ When changing the names, I tried to follow a simple logic. More common Lithuanian names were changed into other common names, rare and unusual names – to other such names.

is never just providing some distant description.⁴¹ It is an engagement that is continuously guided not only by academic theories, but also by new directions and feedback arising from our research participants. In order to maintain ethical collaborations, I have focused on asking research participants what questions and issues were important to *them*, what questions *they* wanted to discuss, and what do *they* needed to emphasise concerning their everyday navigation. Following Passaro, as presented by Cerwonka and Malkki (2007, p. 33), I believe that we should be more concerned with whether we are “close enough” to our research participants, not whether we are “distant enough” from them.

The idea of objectivity and “critical distance” originates in classical ethnographic training as a colonial project to describe “the other”. It has been questioned by feminist scholars, and I have actively tried to avoid “othering” and distancing in my work, aiming, to the contrary, to become close and in solidarity with the individuals that I have engaged with as an ethnographer. In order to protect the trust built in the process of producing this thesis, I have attempted to fully acknowledge all the important work, feedback and intellectual contributions of all my research participants.

In line with María Lugones’ (2010) theorising of decolonial feminism, I have placed the “emphasis on methodologies that work with our lives, so the sense of responsibility is maximal” (p. 755). The sense and vision of solidarity and decoloniality, thus, has arisen from our situated experiences, knowledges and the needs expressed by my research participants. I have striven to shed more light on those who have been rendered invisible (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999; Lugones, 2008) and to give voice to the voiceless (Mohanty, 2003). At the same time, I have tried to be realistic, communicating the potential benefits of this research, but also openly acknowledging its limitations. I have addressed the expectations of my research participants while, at the same time, hoping that this encounter might encourage and support a subtle shift in perspective for them. Embodying the position of ethnographer-feminist-activist-mother, I have tried not only to make their lives and stories visible, but to make them matter, to see their narratives and analyses through a “commitment to transformative work that they inspire” (Anglin, 2013, p. 49), collectively recognising both the extents and limits of agency (ibid, p. 48).

⁴¹ From the lecture delivered by Dean Spade in the framework of Trans Studies and Intersectional Activism. Analysing and Deconstructing the Gender Binary course, which was organised by InterGender, Consortium and Research School in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies and Professor Ulla Manns. It took place May 25–27, 2016 at Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden.

Thesis outline

This thesis consists of three parts: the first contains two introductory chapters that will guide the reader through the basic ethnographic context of the study, introducing places and times that are relevant to it. The second part contains an analysis of my empirical data that is organised into three thematic chapters (Chapters 3, 4 and 5). The thesis ends with a concluding chapter (Chapter 6). In this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), I have presented the aim, objectives, and research questions of my thesis and provided an overview of previous relevant research as well as the theoretical framework and the methodology utilised.

Chapter 2, *Welcome to Lithuania: frictions and transformations*, is an invitation to learn about Lithuania and Kaunas – to get a sense of its historical and geopolitical context and general socio-economic circumstances. This chapter also provides relevant information about family-making norms and societal expectations, political and legal structures during the Soviet past and the neoliberal present. What are the overall circumstances of single mothers in Lithuania? What possibilities do women have to strike the balance between professional work and family responsibilities in post-socialist Lithuania? This chapter will answer these and other related questions.

Chapter 3, *The meaning of everyday life unravelled by ethnographic engagements*, is an in-depth ethnographic account of the everyday lives of single mothers in Lithuania. The chapter analyses the processes of stigmatisation of lone mothers. Touching upon the disciplinary mechanisms that are being reproduced and transferred from generation to generation to maintain the rule of heteronormativity and the nuclear family, this chapter mainly explores the common ways of dealing with different shortcomings. Working flexibly, engaging in short-term projects, participating in a gig economy, constantly networking, continuously educating themselves and re-training are among the most recognisable ways to manage economic precarity. Glimpses into a decolonial rejection of time management, levels of resilience and the search for well-being, together with various acts and skills in “Soviet creativity”, weave the ethnographically grounded fabric of this chapter’s narrative.

Chapter 4, *Managing single-motherhood through social ties*, delves into the assistance provided by parents, parents-in-law, other relatives and near-and-dear ones, as well as, in rare occasions, by friends, neighbours and colleagues at work. It concerns the complicated kinship ties, lines of inheritance,

unexpected solidarities and the heaps of care work that are neglected, yet, indispensable, especially, in the case of single motherhood.

Chapter 5, *Inverting failure: from coping mechanisms to empowerment strategy*, is the last empirical chapter of my thesis. It is a chapter on transformation, which further examines the meaning of agency and resistance in relation to gender, motherhood and family-making. By closely examining the tensions between success and failure, this chapter highlights the centrality and damaging force of ideologically wired and internalised feelings of worthlessness, shame and guilt, motherly devotion, and sacrifice. This chapter offers a critical reading of single motherhood in relation to failure, agency and the politicisation of care.

Chapter 6, *Concluding discussion: precarious motherhood and horizons of care*, is the final chapter of my dissertation, where I summarise my findings, draw conclusions and identify the limitations of this study.

2. WELCOME TO LITHUANIA: FRICTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

A brief introduction to contemporary Lithuania

Lithuania is a country in the northeast of Europe, located on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. It is one of the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), bordering Poland to the south, Belarus to the southeast, Latvia to the north, and Kaliningrad Oblast (a Russian exclave) to the southwest. It is a small country of lakes, forests and wetlands. With a population of 2.8 million (remaining) inhabitants, it is a predominantly Catholic country (93% of Lithuanians proclaim themselves as Christians, 77% of which identify as Catholic)⁴². In contrast to other Baltic states, Lithuania has kept its ethnic homogeneity, with 86% being ethnically Lithuanian.

Historically, this small country was repeatedly occupied and conquered. It was part of the Lithuanian-Poland commonwealth in the 16th century; taken over by tsarist Russia in the 18th century; occupied by the Germans in 1915; regained independence in 1918; but then, once again, annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 together with the other two Baltic States. This phase lasted until 11 March 1990, when Lithuania announced the restoration of independence, becoming the first Soviet-occupied state to do so. For the majority of Lithuanian history, Vilnius has been the capital of the country.

In contrast with high hopes and bright promises for a democratic future, immediately after declaring its independence in 1990, there was a rapid decline following the restructuring of industry, the initiation of land reforms and the privatisation of state companies. Although Lithuania has been attracting direct foreign investment and competing for EU structural funding, the economic development has been largely market driven and private. Even when economic reports praised growing GDP in Lithuania and an economic boom in the Baltic region (in 2004–2007), the life choices of regular people were a better litmus test for Lithuania's economic development than economic tables and statistics (*see* Juška & Woolfson, 2015; Woolfson &

⁴² According to the Census 2011. Retrieved September 23, 2020, from https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-44_lt.

Sommers, 2016). Citizens of Lithuania have increasingly voted with their feet, so to speak, and have left to work in more prosperous Western countries, instead of voicing their concerns to local or national politicians. Huge disillusionment was augmented by the high expectations of a better life, which the struggles for independence had promised to realise. In an interview, a prominent sociologist and gender studies researcher, professor Artūras Tereškinas, suggested that in Lithuania, “many people just close-in in their private lives with their relatives and friends or just the safe space of social networks, trying not to see what’s happening in the public arena, because if you do, there’s nothing much left except committing suicide or emigrating”.⁴³ The overwhelmingly positive reception of this article in the popular news portal *Delfi*⁴⁴, including active circulation in social media channels and more than a thousand comments, suggests the importance of the topic. The researcher’s academic work on masculinities and self-harm in post-independence sociopolitical dispositions reveals the effects of transition on the everyday lives of regular people, their broken lives and identity crises (Tereškinas, 2004; 2009).

While charts and graphs provided a picture of the country’s economic advancement, these formal reports did not reveal the increased hidden costs, the ultimate reliance on social ties and the direct pressure to maximize formal economic “growth” under an aggressive austerity regime (Woolfson & Sommers, 2016; Atas, 2018).

After the Lithuanian European Union referendum took place in 2003, the country joined the EU on 1 May 2004. With the national gates opening even wider, providing Lithuanians with the opportunity to legally work in several EU countries, the scale of emigration increased even more dramatically. While economists and sociologists warned about potential shortages of labour power, greater demographic pressures and the threat of a brain drain (Thaut 2009), people kept emigrating with their entire extended family, in search of a better life (while 26,283 people emigrated in 2003, this number

⁴³ *In this country you are like a cheap Chinese merchandise* [Šioje šalyje esi kaip pigi kiniška prekė]. November 10, 2017, from: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/arturas-tereskinas-sioje-salyje-esi-kaip-pigi-kiniska-preke.d?id=76277491>.

⁴⁴ Although more than 30 years passed since Lithuania regained independence, academic discourse remained reluctant to engage in a Marxist analysis. Lithuanian sociologist prof. Artūras Tereškinas argues that while Soviet rule has deeply affected relationships and livelihoods of Lithuanian people, however, continuing to put blame exclusively on the Soviet past and traumas it has produced redirects our attention from alternative analyses and possible solutions. Tereškinas is calling for a more active engagement, mobilisation and a collective push for changes in the “big” politics, demanding eradication of poverty, rejection of the culture of stigmatisation and bullying. See Jackevičius (2017).

reached 37,691 in 2004 and 57,885 in 2005). In the period between 1990 and 2006, nearly half a million citizens left the country, decreasing the remaining population of Lithuania to less than 3 million.⁴⁵

When the global financial crisis of 2008 hit, Lithuania was one of the countries most severely affected by it (Staeher, 2013; Woolfson & Sommers, 2016; Atas, 2018). While economists celebrated the fast recovery and “successful adjustment” brought about by aggressive austerity measures, in fact, the implementation was far from socially and economically “costless” (Woolfson & Sommers, 2016, p. 78) and sacrificed the lives of many. Such a crisis-driven approach to labour market adjustments, in fact, had led to increased precarisation of work, normalisation of zero-hours working contracts, involuntary unpaid vacations, wage cuts, etc. What was hailed as a profound recovery of the Baltic states, was, according to Atas, rather, a series of harsh austerity measures leading to the “decrease of total social expenditure, cancelation of universal family benefits, cuts in pensions and unemployment benefits” (2018, p. 105). Overall, the austerity measures implemented in Lithuania between 2008 and 2012 caused a serious strain on the income of many households, reduced wages considerably, limited access to healthcare and education, spread non-standard and precarious job contracts, expanded low-paid, casual employment and deepened the shadow economy. Moreover, such measures further perpetrated emigration – what came to be known as a “veritable exodus” (Juška & Woolfson, 2015, p. 237).

Lithuania, like many other post-socialist countries, constitutes a semi-periphery that provides a cheap labour force to core markets. Striving to meet European standards and to fit into the framework of a growing economy – “to progress and develop” – the country has ended up in deep debt, while austerity measures have pauperised the population and added to already existing economic inequalities. Based on his extensive research on social exclusion, precarity, sexuality and wounded masculinity, Lithuanian sociologist and gender studies professor Artūras Tereškinas has been attempting to comprehend the two “national problems” since independence, namely,

⁴⁵ Lithuanian Official Statistics Portal. Retrieved February 20, 2020, from: <http://osp.stat.gov.lt/services-portlet/pub-edition-file?id=3032>. 83 157 people emigrated from Lithuania in 2010 alone. Retrieved August 29, 2021, from: <https://123.emn.lt/>.

exceptionally high rates of emigration⁴⁶ and suicide.⁴⁷ Growing precarity, including poverty among working-class people, deepening social exclusion and income inequality, and normalised practices of marginalisation and moralisation in Lithuanian society are among the primary factors driving such statistics, according to Lithuanian researchers (Tereškinas & Bučaitė-Vilkė, 2015, Atas, 2018).

Although not sufficiently researched, the topic of resistance to austerity measures has focussed on public space and civic participation, which has been repeatedly declared as “non-existent”, given the absence of visible civic participation and protests in the years after Lithuania’s independence (Vonderau, 2008). Any attempt to protest or oppose current political agendas has experienced a backlash, being referred to as “communist nostalgia” through the use of a specific phrase, *homo sovieticus*. This label has been repeatedly used to describe a group of people so as to scapegoat them for the many failures of the new democracy and neoliberal market economy (Vonderau, 2008; Bulota, 2010; Repečkaitė, 2011). The term “homo sovieticus” commonly refers to “a social type devoid of ‘entrepreneurial spirit, initiative, leadership, motivation, and the willingness to take risks and assume responsibility – needed to function well in a market economy’” (Shiller et al., 1992, as cited in Repečkaitė, 2011, p. 56). Generally, this term is taken to refer to people who are incapable of dealing with the new demands and to integrate into a “proper European” society and who remain an “uncivilised, backward people” who need some “help” on their road to Westernisation (ibid). Anyone “who could not keep up with economic and social changes” or “anyone who talks of the welfare state, generous social benefits, a large public sector, and progressive taxes is automatically categorised as a socialist” (Tereškinas, 2018, p. 92). Hence, any type of public political participation in support of more leftist political agendas or as part of public protests has been largely discouraged, both by tying them back discursively to the Soviet past as well as by direct policing and legal prosecutions (Repečkaitė, 2011; Tereškinas, 2018).

However, despite the prevailing myth of passivity and lack of political imagination, some researchers have shown the presence of engagement, critical

⁴⁶ In the period between 1990 and 2006 nearly half a million citizens left the country, the peak numbers coinciding with entrance to the EU in 2004 and the financial crisis in 2008. 57,260 people emigrated in only one year, 2017. Retrieved March 1, 2018, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=55097f7e-fe39-470a-a395-b741787e5899#/>.

⁴⁷ While the European average is 14.1 suicides per 100,000 inhabitants, Lithuania has a suicide mortality rate of 32.7, with male suicides accounting for 47.1 and female 8.1 per 100,000 inhabitants (Lithuanian Department of Statistics).

contestations and playfulness behind various forms of collective resistance. Contestations to austerity measures and shrinking public services have been taking place by way of political and playful organising in autonomous spaces both in Vilnius (Lindqvist, 2015) and Kaunas (Marcinkevičius, 2018), and through open forms of protest against the governmental decisions to employ austerity measures after the financial crisis in 2008 (Repečkaitė, 2011; Brehmer, 2014).

Welcome to Kaunas – a green city of universities

Located in the confluence of Nemunas and Neris, the two main rivers of Lithuania, Kaunas is the country's second largest city.⁴⁸ This specific region was a strategic location for the development of the city throughout history. After World War I, Lithuania achieved independence, and Kaunas became a major hub of modern life, with many universities and a vivid, intellectual crowd. As historical research suggests (Birmontienė & Jurėnienė, 2019, p. 30), at the beginning of the 20th century, Kaunas was one of the largest Lithuanian towns, developing into an alternative cultural centre to Vilnius. During the interwar period (1920–1939), Kaunas served as a temporary capital, while the official capital of Vilnius was under Polish control. Even after Vilnius had re-established its status as the capital, the city of Kaunas kept its title of the “temporary capital”.

Taking the highway from Vilnius and entering Kaunas, visitors are met with the rough aesthetics of the Soviet architecture – grey, nine-storey-tall apartment buildings are the silent gatekeepers of the city. A busy street called *The Avenue of Volunteers* [Savanorių prospektas] leads into the old town. Taking a winding road down the Green Hill [Žaliakalnis], visitors are surrounded by the old oak trees and are soon exposed to a bizarre panorama of a downtown city, framed by a large byzantine church, *Soboras*, and a huge concrete monolith, which once upon a time was meant to be a great Soviet hotel, *Britanica*.⁴⁹ This centrally located, half-built monolithic giant signifies the total political and economic collapse of the early 1990s and contributes to

⁴⁸ According to statistical data, the population of Kaunas during my fieldwork in 2016 was 298,427, while in 2025 it increased to 304,524 (Retrieved July 29, 2025, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?indicator=S3R166#/>).

⁴⁹ Gigantic hotels began to emerge in Soviet Republics as one of the symbols of superiority and power in the modern world.

the otherwise green and modern Kaunas architectural landscape, reminding one of the long years of the history of oppression.⁵⁰

On the other hand, the city of Kaunas has been a significant site for political uprisings, including ones in support of women's mobilisation. For instance, on 17 February 1918, the day after Lithuania declared independence from Russia for the first time, the first women's protest took place in Kaunas.⁵¹ A crowd of around a thousand people took part in the campaign, calling for the inclusion of women in the Lithuanian Council.⁵² Not having been invited as representatives to discuss the issue of the statehood of Lithuania, women "convened at a meeting in Kaunas and applied to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Council of Lithuania, A. Smetona, with a petition, which was signed by 20,000 persons, requesting that the Council of Lithuania also include women representatives" (Birmontienė & Jurėnienė, 2009, p. 33). Women were outraged about such injustice, especially since, already in 1905, the Grand Seimas of Vilnius had crafted a vision of the future of the country, along with the support of the parliament, which was elected by secret voting, that would not discriminate based on gender, nationality nor faith (Birmontienė & Jurėnienė, 2009, p. 23). As a result of these protests, "Article 22 of the first Provisional Constitution of 1918 [...] which was adopted by the State Council of Lithuania on 2 November 1918 announced the equality of all citizens, irrespective of their gender, before the law" (ibid, p. 33), granting Lithuanian women the right to vote already in 1918.

Many women who had been excluded from the parliamentary election took part in preparing the *Independence Act*. In fact, two politically active women – Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė and Jadvyga Juškaitė-Širšė⁵³ –founded the association "Žiburėlis" in 1893 that supported the education of poor, talented children. More than one of the signatories to the *Independence Act* had been raised and educated with the support of this very organisation. According to Birmontienė & Jurėnienė (2009, p. 31), the "[w]omen's movement was linked to political, social and professional activities of women; it

⁵⁰ Some Kaunas inhabitants bitterly say that the *Soviet mentality* won't be gone until the Soviet monoliths, called the *Ghosts of Kaunas*, are finally destroyed.

⁵¹ Since 2016, a small circle of Lithuanian feminists and women rights activists celebrates the 17th of February as the Day of National Emancipation. (See Commemorates National Emancipation Day, commemorating the involvement of women in state-building (2022). Retrieved February 17, 2022, from <https://baltics.news/2022/02/17/commemorates-national-emancipation-day-commemorating-the-involvement-of-women-in-state-building/>).

⁵² Minint Nacionalinę emancipacijos dieną, prisimena moterų įtraukimą į valstybės kūrimą (2022). Retrieved February 17, 2022, from: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1617860/minint-nacionaline-emancipacijos-diena-prisimena-moteru-itrukima-i-valstybes-kurima>.

⁵³ The nicknames at the end of their surnames literally mean "a bee" and "a hornet".

influenced the development of political parties, other social institutions”. Arguably, such an active resistance by women in the beginning of the 20th century positively impacted the processes of democratisation.

One more aspect that I would like to stress in my presentation of Kaunas is its high level of education and literacy – and not only of men. At the end of the 19th century, Lithuanian women were not only quite literate, but “Lithuanian women’s literacy in Kaunas governorship exceeded men’s – by 54.9 and 51.9 %. This is a unique phenomenon which was not observed in any other part of the Russian Empire, though most often women’s education was limited to reading skills” (Aleksandravičius et al., 1996, as cited in Birmontienė & Jurėnienė, 2009, p. 28). According to historical accounts, the standard of education rose even more when Lithuania became independent from czarist Russia, with new schools being established across the country. “In 1919, there were already 1,036 schools in Lithuania, with 45,540 students. Higher education courses in Kaunas were officially given university status on 16 February 1922. During nearly two decades the university produced 3,700 specialists, scholars, and educators” (Eidintas et al., 2013, p. 179).⁵⁴

To this day Kaunas remains an important educational hub. Among the 23 universities across the country (14 public universities, 8 private and one a branch of a Polish university) and the dozens of colleges, Kaunas has five universities and over ten other institutions of higher education, which attract more than 40,000 students annually. According to Eurostat data, Lithuania has the largest population between the ages of 25–34 who have tertiary education (57.5% in 2021, while the EU average is 42.5%).⁵⁵ A key reason for such high literacy numbers is not only the existence of previously free higher education, but also the traditionally high expectations related to obtaining a university degree. In the public imagination, a university degree still carries the promise of upward social mobility and entails high symbolic value

⁵⁴ The oldest Lithuanian university in Vilnius – *Vilniaus Universitetas* – established in 1597, has experienced a lot of changes during the world wars, interwar period and Soviet times, re-gaining its original status, name and autonomy only in 1990. The university in Kaunas – *Vytautas Magnus University [Vytauto Didžiojo Universitetas]* or *University of Lithuania*, as it was called in the beginning – was a public university and the only Lithuanian university that worked without significant interruptions throughout interwar period. It was established in 1922 and, after multiple occupations and alterations, re-established in 1989 by the common efforts of Lithuanian academics and expats. It was the first autonomous institution of higher education in Lithuania (Retrieved February 10, 2019, from: <http://www.vdu.lt/lt/100-vdu-istorijos-datu/>).

⁵⁵ Eurostat data. Retrieved January 24, 2023, from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_03__custom_4651834/default/table?lang=en. According to the Official Statistics Portal of Lithuania, the percentage of Lithuanian population, aged 30-34, who had tertiary education in 2021, was 60.3% (68.1% of women and 47.6% of men) (Retrieved January 24, 2023, from: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?indicator=S3R0138#/.)

(“symbolic capital”, in Bourdieu’s terms). Given that Kaunas has the biggest number of students per capita, this certainly contributes to its problem of post-educational life chances.⁵⁶ The absence of opportunities for an adequate salary and a career contribute to the debates on the *precarious global labour force* (Standing, 2011).

On the other hand, with the current educational reforms, the higher education system is experiencing major cuts of public expenditure, forcing many universities to merge into fewer ones (based on their profiles), increasing the cost of studying and spending more money on marketing. The critics of these ongoing reforms are pointing to the neoliberalisation of higher education in order to understand them (Samalavičius, 2019). Such shifts, following the first reforms, have reduced the number of students graduating each year, from an average of 21,000 in 2007–2012 to around 13,000 in 2014–2017. As statistical data suggests, in the period of 2010–2017, Lithuanian universities lost around 40% of their (potential) students to higher education institutions abroad. Indeed, the cost of education has become lower elsewhere and, as a result, an increasing number of young people have gone to study in such countries as Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and the UK.

The women I was engaged with in my research still had the experience of a free university education, gaining their bachelor’s and master’s degrees, mostly, in their homeland. One doesn’t need to engage in ethnographic research to understand that such a discrepancy between higher education carrying elevated expectations and the diminished actual life chances for professional career opportunities plays a major role in people’s dissatisfaction with their lives. Contrary to high expectations, Lithuania in general – and Kaunas in particular – has not offered enough jobs with a salary sufficient to sustain a family. With a minimum monthly salary of 730 EUR in 2022 (840 EUR in 2023), Lithuania still ranks among the poorest countries in the EU, based on the average annual full-time salary.⁵⁷

In the summer of 2025, the city of Kaunas had a population of 304,524 (compared to 418,000 in 1989).⁵⁸ The steep decrease in Kaunas’ population

⁵⁶ According to *Kaunas Free Economic Zone* presentation, in 2016 there were 54335 students enrolled in 7 universities, 18 vocational schools and 8 colleges in Kaunas region. (Retrieved April 28, 2018, from <http://fz.lt/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Kauno-FEZ-presentation.pdf>)

⁵⁷ According to Eurostat data, in 2021, the average annual full-time adjusted salary for employees in the EU was €33,500, while in Lithuania it was around €20,000 (Retrieved January 24, 2023, from <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20221219-3>).

⁵⁸ As the Lithuanian Department of Statistics reveals, since the restoration of political independence in 1990, the population has shrunk by more than 30%, reaching its lowest point in 2019 (286,754 inhabitants). A very homogenous city in terms of nationality (according to the National Census of 2001, 93% of the Kaunas

over this 25-year period caused dramatic changes in urban life. The previously strong industrial city, which was heavily industrialised by the Soviet Union after WWII and produced a quarter of Lithuania's industrial output, lost its momentum after independence by losing its factories. Industry in Kaunas was dominated by the manufacturing of textiles and garments, furniture, wood products and metallurgy. Closing the majority of factories and privatising state companies left the city with an unemployment rate of 17.8% in 2001 (which was reduced to 10% in 2022).⁵⁹ While statistics have shown that this number has been reduced to a mere 5.9% in 2006, these numbers are, in fact, skewed by the wave of emigration of Lithuanian workers to the UK and Ireland after Lithuania's accession to the EU in 2004. In January 2014, the Labour Exchange in Kaunas area recorded nearly 36,000 unemployed people, which represented 9.9% of the total working-age population in the Kaunas region.⁶⁰ The expansion of precarious, flexible, non-contract jobs and informal gigs has become a new reality for the Lithuanian population.

Transformations in the Private

Family and childcare in Soviet times

It is important to give a brief overview of women's lives and the childcare situation during Soviet times, because most of my research participants were born before Lithuania regained independence. Furthermore, most of their mothers grew up and became adults under the Soviet regime, which left them with certain traumatic experiences that have been transmitted to the next generation of women – my researcher participants.

Evoking a decolonial perspective, it is relevant to recall the history of imperialism along with its foundation in colonisation, slavery, forced labour and exploitation. The Soviet Union was, too, built on cheap labour and resource extraction from its peripheries, on very unequal terms of development. As Madina Tlostanova (2012b, p. 131) argues, the parallels between the post-colonial and post-socialist realities are not only those of the coloniality

population is of Lithuanian origin), it started slowly growing again in 2020, reaching 304,524 in 2025 (Retrieved July 29, 2025, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?indicator=S3R166#/>).

⁵⁹ Retrieved January 24, 2023, from: https://eures.ec.europa.eu/living-and-working/labour-market-information/labour-market-information-lithuania_en.

⁶⁰ Retrieved August 18, 2020, from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eures/main.jsp?catId=2779&acro=lmi&lang=en&countryId=LT®ionId=LT0&nuts2Code=LT00&nuts3Code=LT002>.

of mind and internalised inferiority, but also, a well realised fixed position in the “new world architecture”. According to Tlostanova (2015a, p. 41):

the ancestors of [...] future post-Soviet slaves traveled the forced path of Soviet modernism with its double standards, racism, othering, violent emancipation, and low glass ceilings [...], but also with such socialist advantages as universal education (although Russified, and not always of good quality), minimal social guarantees within the Soviet colonial mono-economic model, limited vertical social mobility for national minorities in accordance with Soviet multiculturalism, and honorary membership in the Second World.

Although referring to Central Asian women, Tlostanova makes a good point in comparing Western colonialism with Soviet “colonialism”, drawing parallels in terms of the secondary citizenship, the strong grip of Westernised progressivism and developmentalism as well as women’s oppression both in post-colonial and post-soviet peripheries (ibid, p. 42). As the author further suggests, “one of the obvious intersections of the post-Soviet and the post-colonial lies in the psychology of colonialism and in anticolonial resistance. It acquires additional, often gendered overtones in the Soviet case – the colonised and the politically repressed Soviet males react identically by projecting their humiliation onto those who are still weaker and more dependent – women and children [...]” (Tlostanova 2012b, p. 137).

Indeed, building the Soviet empire required labour force from every corner of it, thus, women’s “emancipation” and “equality” in terms of labour was not an accidental one. As historians have noted, women and children constituted the bulk of the early industrial proletariat. Being the cheapest labour force, they also were the most manipulable and exploitable workers, for a woman with children had to accept any wage if she wanted to survive (Mies, 1986/2014, p. 105). Along with formal labour on state-owned collectivised farms, women also had to work in privately assigned land-for-subsistence production, while also carrying a third burden, the household work and childcare, which men did not generally share (Mies, 1986/2014, p. 180).

As Lithuanian researcher Dalia Marcinkevičienė (2008) points out, in the Soviet Union the politics of women’s introduction to the formal labour force was actively initiated in the early 1920s. According to her, due to such planning, women’s participation in the labour market was unprecedented and not comparable to that in any Western European country at that time. In 1989, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than 80% of women in Baltic states were working full-time, while also taking care of the household duties and fulfilling the roles of a wife and a mother, in addition

to their duties as a worker in the formal labour market (2008, p. 31). Providing a rich historical account and analysing excerpts of women's biographical narratives, Marcinkevičienė provides a picture of the daily lives of women under the communist regime. In 1945, Lithuanian newspapers insisted that “women must [*privalo*] fulfil the multiple roles casted upon them by government and invest their interest in the matters of family, working life and building of socialism” (2008, p. 32).

Trying to reduce their double, or even triple burden, women in the Soviet Union tried refusing to bear more children (Mies, 1986/2014). However, the information about and access to abortion was scarce until 1955, when the situation slightly improved in most Soviet states.⁶¹ With a downward trend in the birth rate in the 1930s–1950s, the government offered “financial incentives to married – and for a time also to unmarried – women to bear more children: ‘Motherhood has been extolled as a patriotic duty and those who had many children were honoured accordingly’” (Croll, 1979, as cited in Mies, 1986, p. 181). With the decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1944, pregnant mothers, mothers with many children and single mothers were encouraged to give birth, promising them a variety of state support.⁶²

In Lithuania, the incentive to keep women reproducing the workers of the “great communist state” was enacted by three formal measures: maternity allowance, paid maternity leave (16 weeks in total) and institutionalised childcare from a very early age. The maternity allowances were paid monthly to single mothers (for every child) and mothers who had more than two children (for the third child and all the subsequent children), but only until five years of age (Marcinkevičienė, 2008, p. 33). Another pronatalist commandment instituted an honorary award of “multi-children mother” [*daugiavaikė motina*] to any woman who had more than four children. A mother who gave birth and raised ten or more children received the honorary

⁶¹ A major “liberalization” of abortion laws occurred only after World War II. On 25 November 1955, two years after the death of Stalin, the Supreme Soviet repealed the 1936 restrictions. The reasons presented were to reduce “the harm caused to the health of women by abortions performed outside of hospitals” and “to give women the possibility of deciding for themselves the question of motherhood” (Field, 1956, as cited in David, 1992, p. 5). According to historians, almost all socialist countries of the CEE, except Albania, followed and passed such legislation (ibid). On the topic of the inhumane approach to abortions in the Soviet Union also see the Romanian movie directed by Cristian Mungiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007).

⁶² The Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR introduced on July 8, 1944, was called “On increasing of state subsidies to pregnant women, mothers of many children and single mothers, strengthening of maternity and child protection, establishing of the highest decoration – the title of ‘Mother Hero’ and the Order ‘Mother Glory’ and the ‘Maternity medal’” (Leinartė, 2012, p. 105).

name of “Mother heroine” [*Motina didvyrė*] (ibid).⁶³ However, such financial and honorary measures, which were intended to increase the birth-rate, according to Lithuanian historian Dalia Leinartė (2012, p. 105), failed to produce the anticipated results in the Soviet Union. There was a lot of bureaucracy, incompetence, data falsification, petty theft, large-scale felony and deliberate forgery (ibid, pp. 112–113), which largely obstructed allowance payments and prevented the expected support and encouragement to be regularly received by the mothers.

The promised state support for single mothers was also nearly unattainable. The term was not clearly defined, and there was a lot of confusion as to who should be considered a “single mother” in Lithuania. According to Leinartė’s (2012) historical investigation, since the 19th century, single mothers had no place in Lithuanian society, while children born out of wedlock were called “bastards” and described as “little rats” that should not even exist. Neither the families nor relatives, nor the communities in general, provided care for such women and their children. An illegitimate child in a nineteenth-century Lithuanian community was not tolerated and, if a single mother found a partner to marry, any previous children she had were often rejected by the new family (Leinartė, 2017, p. 41).

Moreover, according to Leinartė (2012), “[t]here is no doubt that single mothers were also stigmatized in Catholic and conservative prewar Lithuania and that a similar attitude was preserved after World War II. Accordingly, the only ‘single mother’ Lithuanian society accepted was a married woman who had been abandoned by the child’s father” (p. 114).⁶⁴ During the 1950s, single mothers were even advised to give their children to foster care homes, while keeping the right to reclaim them should the familial situation improve (Marcinkevičienė, 2008, p. 34). Consequently, single mothers were not given the help they were promised by the state and had to handle their poor family lives mostly on their own.

In Soviet Lithuania, as well as in the Soviet Union in general, as Utrata (2015, p. 31) suggests, marriage and children were “compulsory” for women, however, housework and childrearing were not included within the category of productive labour and sufficient public services were not provided to them. According to Leinartė (2010, p. 25), public childcare did not arrive to Lithuania until the late 1970s, and there was a constant lack of nurseries and

⁶³ According to Marcinkevičienė (2008, p. 33), 5 mothers were awarded “Mother heroine” honours and 171 women “Motherly glory” or the “Motherhood medal”, in 1945.

⁶⁴ “According to statistics presented by the central administration in 1944, there were only six single mothers in all of Lithuania” (Leinartė, 2012, p. 114).

childcare institutions. The Soviet propaganda that “childcare makes it possible for mothers to participate in public, political, and cultural life” (ibid, p. 25) remained only a slogan, while actual support was inaccessible to most working mothers. Therefore, handling the additional load of necessary care work was left for the private domain – and to the women’s abilities and imagination (Marcinkevičienė, 2008). The network of institutions for childcare was very poor, especially outside the big cities, where domestic appliances were often lacking and/or insufficient and the husbands’ participation in the family’s life was virtually non-existent. As the question of daily survival was primarily a question of a woman’s own initiative and creativity (ibid, p. 33),⁶⁵ women had to rely heavily on support from their own parents and thus children were often raised by one of their grandmothers (either from the mother’s or the father’s side of the family). According to Marcinkevičienė (2008, p. 35), many women led hard lives, working full time and seeing their children only episodically, which constructed a kind of formal, alienated relationship based on respect rather than emotional connection. That is also confirmed by Leinartė (2010), who states that insufficient support in terms of reproductive labour has inflicted a lot of harm upon the interpersonal relationships and affective dynamics within the family (p. 198). This aspect has been of great importance in my research, providing some useful insights when analysing the informal networks of support and grandmothers’ engagement in childcare.

Generally, there is a lack of historical and sociological studies concerning single motherhood and women’s lives in general during the Soviet times (especially the late Soviet period). A few researchers have pioneered the field, examining women’s histories and gender histories in Soviet Lithuania (Jurėnienė, 2006; Praspaliauskienė, 2006; Marcinkevičienė, 2008; Leinartė, 2010, 2012, 2017). However, the last decades of the Soviet period and the early years of Lithuanian independence (starting in 1991) remain largely understudied. Nonetheless, some insights about women’s situation can be drawn from the research on welfare regimes (Aidukaitė, 2004; Gedvilaitė, 2006).

Lithuanian researcher Margarita Gedvilaitė (2006) examines the changes in the welfare system, showing how they affected women’s private lives, including their social and psychological wellbeing. According to Gedvilaitė (2006, p. 24), a fundamental shift in the welfare regimes took place soon after Lithuania regained independence, moving from what she calls a “compulsory welfare system” (until 1994) to a “liberal bureaucratic welfare system” (after

⁶⁵ I will return to the questions of *creativity* in my next analytical chapter.

1994). In socialist Lithuania, according to the author, a redistributive welfare mechanism was provided by way of full compulsory employment, free medical care and guaranteed free education. No free choice policy supported socialist ideology, which stated that everybody was equally responsible for building the socialist state and, also, equally eligible for the state's care and support without any profiling or differentiating. However, some groups that were specifically targeted by the state were single mothers and multi-children families, which allowed for the construction of the identities of a "mother" (Gedvilaitė, 2006, p. 24) and a "heroic mother" (Marcinkevičienė, 2008). Unfortunately, as Leinartė (2012) observes, these statements did not translate into practical help for single mothers, who often lacked a better provision of support and resources.⁶⁶

In the new "liberal bureaucratic welfare system", Gedvilaitė (2006) argues, social policy became less universal, where the state's ideological commitment to take care of everyone shifted to the ideology of personal responsibility to take care of oneself and one's family. Under this new welfare regime, government support started to target families struggling to meet their basic needs. Hence, "the liberal bureaucratic system" has slowly constructed the identities of "needy", "deserving" and "undeserving", while *families* that needed additional social support became one of the main target groups of the new welfare system (Gedvilaitė, 2006, p. 24). The welfare state has developed a more differentiating and, in Gedvilaitė's terms, "de-humanising" character (ibid).

The general relevance of this historical section will be further illustrated in the subsequent analytical chapters, where the lived experiences of social stigmatisation will be illuminated by single mothers' own accounts. Drawing on empirical material, I will demonstrate the role of state support and the effect of an everlasting ideology of personal responsabilisation and dehumanisation on women's well-being. The importance of presenting historical context is also apparent when drawing parallels between the pronatalist rhetoric in Soviet times and contemporary Lithuania, as well as the ever-present "conservative Catholic Lithuanian family traditions" (Leinartė 2012, p. 118).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ As Leinartė (2012, p. 118) notes, the family support policy measures, centrally designed by the Soviet authorities (e.g., the aforementioned decree of 1944), have been never fully applied in Lithuania, not only due to the dishonest attempts by the local Lithuanian administration (the Office of State Benefits for Mothers of Large Families and Single Mothers), but also, to a large extent, due to "the significance of everyday family practices and traditional normativity".

⁶⁷ The arguments often point to nationalist sentiments by juxtaposing the shrinking population with the number of abortions performed in the country each year: "because of the low fertility rate and some deaths

Family, marriage and single motherhood in contemporary Lithuania

According to Lithuanian family researchers, after regaining independence, the organisation of the family in Lithuania experienced some shifts, induced by attempts to “catch up” with the *West* and even its “more advanced” Baltic counterparts, Latvia and Estonia (Dumbliauskienė & Raulušonytė, 2004). Such “lagging behind” has been partially explained by Lithuania’s strong Catholic tradition and institutionalised sentiments about the “traditional family” and “family values” (Gil & Kligman, 2000). While in the West family transformations have been ongoing since mid-1960s, informed by the industrial re-organisation and feminist movements, in Lithuania, the first steps since the interwar period were taken only in 1990, leading the society towards the so-called *modern* type of family (Stankūnienė et al., 2003; Dumbliauskienė & Raulušonytė, 2004; Činikienė, 2011). What characterised the modern family was mostly a decreasing number of marriages and births, declining numbers of children within the marriage (one child becoming the norm rather than the exception), an increasing number of non-registered co-habitations (non-marital relationships) and extramarital births among cohabiting couples and to lone parents.⁶⁸ Moreover, having a child became a matter of choice, rather than an obligation. According to Dumbliauskienė and Raulušonytė (2004, p. 35), a “certain kind of childlessness started spreading around [*plinta savotiška bevaikystė*]”.

When the country embraced the modern model of family making, the number of marriages dropped nearly by half. As a group of researchers (Maslauskaitė et al., 2015, p. 873) suggest, a growing level of modernisation within a society correlates to an increase in the rates of divorce, especially among more privileged groups, making it a rather normative behaviour. In 2013, there were, roughly, 20,500 officially registered marriages in Lithuania (which is one of the highest numbers of marriages in the EU); however, in

the country is *losing* (sic!) around 10,000 inhabitants yearly. Because of the emigration – 20,000 yearly” (Retrieved May 30, 2018, from: <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/demografinė-situacija-lietuvoje-gasdina-jei-taip-toliau-2060-m-lietuvoje-neliks-ne-2-mln-gyventoju.d?id=77888633>).

⁶⁸ The proportion of live births outside marriage in the EU stood at 42% in 2018. This is 17 percentage points above the value in 2000. It signals new patterns of family formation alongside the more traditional model where children were born within marriage. In 2018, extramarital births outnumbered births inside marriages in eight EU Member States: France (60%), Bulgaria (59%), Slovenia (58%), Portugal (56%), Sweden (55%), Denmark and Estonia (both 54%) as well as the Netherlands (52%). Lithuania and Poland were at the other end of the spectrum, as more than 70% of births in each of these Member States occurred within marriages (Births outside marriage statistics by Eurostat. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20200717-1>).

the same year, 10,000 divorces were registered, suggesting that every second married couple would eventually divorce (*see* Graph 2 in the Appendix).⁶⁹ In 2020, the highest crude marriage rates within the EU were reported in Hungary (6.9 marriages per 1,000 persons), Latvia (5.6) and Lithuania (5.5). However, in 2020, the highest crude divorce rates within the EU were reported in Latvia, Lithuania and Denmark (all registering 2.7 divorces per 1,000 persons).⁷⁰ These numbers raise questions about the institution of marriage and its (material) benefits, not only while it lasts, but also (and especially) after it ends. According to a report by family researchers Maslauskaitė and Stankūnienė (2017, p. 4), men who were previously married tended to pay alimonies much more often than those who were not living in a registered marriage with the mothers of their children. This is also due to the legal uncertainty of extramarital partnerships, which has a negative impact on the meeting of child support obligations.

According to the 2021 National Census data, married persons still account for the largest proportion of the adult population, both among men (54 percent) and women (46 percent). However, among women, widows and divorced women constitute a large share of the non-married population (14 percent each), while women who have never been married constitute 26 percent of the population.⁷¹ As around one third of all children are raised outside of marriage, these numbers raise concerns about living conditions and the networks of support.

While there was a significant decline in the number of marriages immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it had begun to slowly grow again in 2010s. This could be related to the 2008 financial crisis, which increased the risk of (in-work) poverty and precarious labour conditions, especially affecting single mothers. As Natalija Atas' (2019) doctoral dissertation demonstrates, employers in Lithuania are often unwilling to employ single mothers, because of their child-caring obligations.⁷² Atas (2019) gives the example of a single mother who was about to look for a new job due to

⁶⁹ Lithuanian Department of Statistics. Retrieved February 20, 2016, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/informaciniai-pranesimai?articleId=2549438>.

⁷⁰ Marriages and divorces statistics by Eurostat. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics.

⁷¹ Population by marital status and municipality according to National Census 2021. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=09a0a689-4767-4481-a3af-42ea2ea9fdf3#.

⁷² This research was conducted in January 2012 in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania, and based on 36 semi-structured interviews with working people, 28 of whom were women. All participants were living in families with children and more than half of them were single mothers at the time of this study (Atas, 2019, p. 113).

the closure of the factory where she had been working. Her anxiety concerning the upcoming job hunt is a common experience of many mothers, especially single ones: “everyone is afraid to hire a mother with 3 children. They are saying what will happen if any of the children will get ill?” (Atas, 2019, p. 117).

According to statistics, in 2021 in Lithuania, 21% of children under the age of 18 lived with a single parent.⁷³ This number has decreased since the most recent previous census was held in 2011, when nearly one third of all underage children in Lithuania were raised by a single parent (27% in total, 23.1% with a single mother and 4% with a single father) (Stankūnienė et al., 2016).⁷⁴ However, this remains a problematic issue, as 20.1% of households living at risk of poverty in 2020 consisted of one adult with at least one child.⁷⁵ It is, thus, apparent that single parent families in Lithuania face a very high risk of ending up in poverty (Aidukaitė, 2004; Atas, 2019), while mothers are much more likely to face economic hardships when raising children alone. As researchers Maslauskaitė and Platūkytė (2020, p. 78) suggest, as many as “every second single mother with children lives at the risk of poverty”. Furthermore, the research has shown that re-partnering rates for older women and for those who have children are relatively low (Maslauskaitė & Baublytė, 2012, p.110).⁷⁶

To avoid reducing single mothers’ situation to mere numbers, it is important to look at single mothers as a heterogeneous group, paying attention to their lived experiences, which are not uniform and are conditioned by social, economic, and structural family-level factors (Maslauskaitė & Platūkytė, 2020). However, according to a recent study by Maslauskaitė (2017, p.627), a woman’s educational level has not been proven significant in determining the perceived changes in her material well-being after divorce,

⁷³ In 2021, from a total of 313,185 nuclear families, the number of children aged under 18 who lived with a single parent was 65,488 (21%). Children taken care by a married couple, 212,709 (68%); cohabiting couple, 34,988 (11%). (Number of nuclear families according to *Official Statistics Portal*. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=09a0a689-4767-4481-a3af-42ea2ea9fdf3#/>)

⁷⁴ Based on the National census data from 2011, the majority of single mothers with underage children are either divorced women (42.9%) or are married but live without a partner (29.4%) (Stankūnienė et al., 2016, p. 83).

⁷⁵ “A household living at risk of poverty” is defined as one in which the income is less than 40% of median income, according to *Official Statistics Portal*. (Retrieved January 25, 2023, from <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/en/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=09a0a689-4767-4481-a3af-42ea2ea9fdf3#/>)

⁷⁶ In Lithuania, according to a study by Maslauskaitė & Baublytė (2012, p. 110), only younger women without children stand good chances of re-partnering. The chances of re-partnering and remarrying are much higher for men.

while a direct link between education and economic stability was barely discernible.⁷⁷

Despite the slight changes in family form, socially accepted norms of family building and the gender distribution of labour have not experienced any major shifts (*see* Ancevičiūtė, 2023). As several sociological studies in Lithuania illustrate, even with high participation of women in the formal labour market, their involvement has been continuously hampered due to their familial commitments. According to Lithuanian researchers, the distribution of reproductive labour has remained mainly unaffected, with women performing the main load of domestic and affective labour (Matonytė, 2002; Reingardė, 2004; Tereškinas, 2010; Činikienė, 2011; Maslauskaitė, 2004).

Childcare support in contemporary Lithuania

As in many other countries, in Lithuania, parental leave is paid based on labour market participation and one's official work record. Prior to 2023, women could apply for childcare allowance only if they had been employed for the last 12 months. Now, the minimum duration of required previous employment has been reduced to 6 months. According to the most recent regulation on parental leave in Lithuania, 2025,⁷⁸ there are two options for taking parental leave: (1) 18 months of leave (until the new-born is 18 months old), which guarantees 60% of one's previous salary; or (2) 24 months of leave, which guarantees 45% of one's previous salary during the first year and 30% during the second.⁷⁹

Another addition to the parental leave regulations is that women can work during their parental leave period. Previously, this option was available only to those who did not receive any monetary support from the state. Those

⁷⁷ One of the hypotheses of the research was that well-educated single mothers should be better rewarded in the labour market even after divorce, so the perception of changes in material well-being should be positively linked to the educational resources (Maslauskaitė, 2017, p. 618).

⁷⁸ Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania. Retrieved January 28, 2025, from <https://socmin.lrv.lt/en/activities/social-insurance-1/social-insurance-benefits/childcare-benefit/>. Until 2023, there had been three options for parental leave: (1) a one year option – before the child reaches one year old – which guarantees 100% of the recipient's compensated salary (after taxes) for one full year; (2) the two-year option, which is calculated as follows: before a child turns one year old, the amount of the benefit is 70% of the previous salary, and then in the second year, before the child turns two, 40% of the recipient's former earnings is provided; and (3) the third option follows the financial scheme of the second option, however, it does not include any compensation during the third year. This option simply grants the possibility to secure one's workplace until the child turns three years old, while retaining the same amounts of benefit during the first two years. It is quite common that women take two years of leave, which gives them 110% of their previous annual salary, spread out over two years.

⁷⁹ For more detailed analysis of parental leave policies in Lithuania *see* Brazienė & Vyšniauskienė, 2020.

entitled to childcare allowance were discouraged from working, for receiving any income (regardless of the sum) would immediately cut any state support. Despite the seemingly positive fact that the new regulations now allow for mothers to work and earn additional money, there are certain restrictions: if the sum of childcare allowance plus earnings exceeds the mother's previous salary, then the size of state allowance would be reduced accordingly.⁸⁰

With regard to the father's involvement in childcare, there has been steady encouragement for fathers to take parental leave. In 2011, the new legislation enabled fathers to take time off from their work and stay home until the baby is one month old. In 2017, the legislation was modified allowing fathers to use their one month of paternity leave at any time without interruption until the baby is 3 months old. In 2011, this opportunity was used by only 1,200 fathers, in comparison with 18,800 mothers who utilized the parental leave available to them.⁸¹ Another novelty in the 2023 regulation is that each parent (including adoptive parents and legal guardians) is entitled, at any time before the child reaches the age of 18 months (or 24 months, depending on which option the parents choose), to take a non-transferable two-month portion of their available parental leave.⁸² Subsequently, according to statistics, the number of fathers taking parental leave during the second year of the child's life "has increased three times since 2009, 3,300 fathers took paid parental leave in Lithuania in 2009, whilst 10,300 fathers in 2018" (Brazienė & Vyšniauskienė, 2020, p. 37).

Such small steps facilitate fathers' engagement in the sphere of reproductive work; however, as with many other family support measures, this alteration is designed mostly for nuclear families and disregards households with lone caretakers (Skubiejūtė, 2020, p. 17). The question that needs to be addressed, then, is one of care. As Narotzky and Besnier state (2014, p. S7),

[c]entral to well-being, care can be provisioned in or out of market circuits of exchange, but it is also framed by the tension between love and money. [...]

⁸⁰ Kalinkaitė-Matuliauskienė (2023). LRT trumpai. Nuo sausio – pokyčiai būsimiems tėvams: neperleidžiami mėnesiai, kitokia atostogų trukmė ir išmokos. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/1842663/lrt-trumpai-nuo-sausio-pokyčiai-busimiems-tevams-neperleidžiami-mėnesiai-kitokia-atostogu-trukme-ir-ismokos>.

⁸¹ In order to be remunerated while on parental leave, fathers, just like mothers, had to have an uninterrupted employment contract for at least 12 months prior to the parental leave (Retrieved July 28, 2020, from: <http://www.tavovaikas.lt/tecio-puslapis/as-tetis/nuo-liepos-1-dienos-keiciasi-tevystes-atostogu-tvarka.d?id=75054450>).

⁸² An exception is applied when a child is raised by a single parent, who can then take an additional two months of non-transferable parental leave. Then the total four months of non-transferable parental leave time is compensated at 78% of the previous salary.

The practice of care involves a constellation of agents that operate in domestic, market, state, and voluntary sectors, forming what Razavi (2007) calls the ‘care diamond.’ The interdependence of these various agents means that changes in care practices in one sector (e.g., the household) are often related to changes in another sector (e.g., state services).

The changes in the state provision of public services, as well as in national politics in general, are massively affecting the micro politics in the family as well as the everyday life strategies of mothers.

In terms of the existing infrastructure and accessibility to free childcare facilities and services, Lithuania is in a permanent state of lacking (Ancevičiūtė, 2023). According to Brazienė and Daukantienė (2010, p. 56), in Lithuania, the number of childcare institutions, as well as accessibility to good-quality and affordable childcare facilities, have been steadily decreasing since the regaining of independence. While the number of childcare service institutions right before independence (1991) was 1,808, in 2003, the number dropped to 672 (a decrease of almost three times). The number of children in preschool education in 2021 was 124,028; however, there were only 720 preschool education (childcare) institutions. In Kaunas alone, in 2021, there were 14,830 preschool-aged children and only 100 childcare institutions (Lithuanian Department of Statistics, 2023),⁸³ a large number of which are unaffordable private childcare institutions (the minimum cost being 350 EUR per month).⁸⁴ This problem has been raised multiple times in the Lithuanian media, stating that, especially in bigger cities, the supply doesn’t meet the demand. A UNICEF Report (2021) on Lithuanian childcare services also confirms that there is a lack of public childcare institutions.⁸⁵

In comparison to countries that have well developed childcare services, Lithuania’s ranking with respect to formal childcare was one of the lowest in the EU in 2020. While in the Netherlands only 21.9% of children under the

⁸³ Number of children in preschool education, Number of preschool education institutions, *Official Statistics Portal 2023*. Retrieved January, 25 2023, from: <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=ef8bb367-c971-4abb-be5d-2f8f778f90b8#/>.

⁸⁴ Many families register their children to a public kindergarten immediately after the child’s birth, however, that doesn’t always guarantee a place in a public daycare facility. For single mothers and other low-income families, private childcare is simply unaffordable (LRT.lt. Retrieved January 27, 2023, from: <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1406360/neissprendziama-didmiesciu-beda-privatus-darzeliai-per-brangus-patekti-i-valstybini-beveik-neimanoma-misija;https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1450880/privatus-darzeliai-ikandami-ne-visiems-o-gauti-vieta-valstybiniam-sudetinga-misija>).

⁸⁵ A deep dive into the European Child Guarantee in Lithuania Literature review (2021). UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, Geneva, 2021. Retrieved January, 27 2023, from: <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/18881/file/Lithuanian%20Deep%20Dive%20Literature%20Review.pdf>.

age of three were primarily cared for by their parents, in Lithuania this percentage is as high as 69.5 %.⁸⁶ As the study conducted in 2014 entitled *Use of childcare services in the EU Member States and progress towards the Barcelona targets* (2014, p. 7) also demonstrates, Lithuania had less than 20% of children under the age of three being taken care of through public arrangements. Also, the percentage of children between the ages of 3 and the mandatory school age who received formal care was one of the lowest (around 60%) among EU countries. The study assessed countries progress toward the “Barcelona targets” of improving the rate of employment of the parents of young children, facilitating greater women’s inclusion into the work force and reducing child poverty.⁸⁷ In this report, Lithuania was portrayed as “catching up”, “falling further behind”, and “losing momentum” (ibid, p. 9), which proves that the country has been struggling to fundamentally improve its childcare policies and services since regaining independence.⁸⁸ The further analysis of my ethnographic data will be set against the backdrop of this historical overview and statistical data. I will then move on to analyse the daily life strategies of single mothers for handling both productive and reproductive labour.

Concluding notes: when public meets private

In this chapter, I have introduced the Lithuanian context, ethnographically guiding the reader into the green city of Kaunas and providing some historical material so as to better understand the social landscape of the city since the early 20th century. Active civic engagement and women’s organising are relevant points of departure in my dissertation. This chapter has demon-

⁸⁶ In 2020 in the EU, children aged less than three years were mainly cared for by their parents (53.4 %), while one third (32.3 %) received some form of formal child care and one fifth (20.9 %) received other types of childcare. (Retrieved January 25, 2023, from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_childcare_arrangements#Childcare_arrangements).

⁸⁷ Specifically, the intention was to encourage member states to examine the demand for childcare facilities and “in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90 per cent of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33 per cent of children under 3 years of age” (*Presidency Conclusions – Barcelona, 15 and 16 March 2002*, p. 12). *Use of childcare services in the EU Member States and progress towards the Barcelona targets*. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR185.html.

⁸⁸ “Lithuania is catching up again with the European train”. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from <http://lzinius.lt/lzinius/mokslas-ir-svietimas/lietuva-vel-vejasi-europos-traukini/33714>; “Lithuania is catching up with Europe galloping”. Retrieved July 28, 2020, from http://www.technologijos.lt/n/zmoniu_pasaulis/redakcijos_akiratis/S-45385/straipsnis/Lietuva-suoliais-vejasi-Europa; “Google research: Lithuania is catching up with world tendencies”. Retrieved July 30, 2020, from <https://www.delfi.lt/mokslas/technologijos/google-tyrimas-lietuva-vejasi-pasaulines-tendencijas.d?id=76199875>.

strated that despite the many burdens of motherhood and reproductive labour, Lithuanian women have been able to organise since the early years of the 20th century, demanding that their voices be heard, for inclusion and for better living conditions. It is important not to ignore that a crowd of people, both women and men, gathered in Kaunas on the 17th of February 1918 to protest the exclusion of women from a major political act – the act of the country's independence. It is also crucial to remember that Lithuanian women have educated themselves from early on, actively demanding equal access to education and politics, and demanding their voting rights from the turn of the 20th century (LaFont, 1998). Finally, they won the right to vote in 1918 – earlier than women in the US and many countries in Western Europe.

This chapter also provides some historical perspectives on failing family support models, from early Soviet times until today, showing how stigmatisation of single motherhood has been present in the society throughout the last century, impeding single mothers' attempts to live dignified lives and to secure the well-being of their children. The general image of a mother in the early 20th century, who has to juggle paid work and reproductive labour, hasn't changed drastically, despite changing ideologies and welfare regimes. Despite Lithuania's political shift to democracy, in terms of living conditions, single mothers have continued to experience structural precarity more than anyone else. As research on Lithuanian family making illustrates, state support has been insufficient, and even de-humanising (Gedvilaitė, 2006; Skubiejūtė 2020), involving a lot of bureaucracy and the necessity of additional efforts to obtain the support. Thus, a lot of care work has been distributed among the relatives of the mothers and their communities, engaging friends, neighbours, and family members as a safety net for survival (I will continue this discussion in Chapter 4).

Persistent pronatalist rhetoric and the trends of familialisation have played a significant role in Lithuanian history, as in many other post-socialist states (Gal & Kligman, 2000). Since Soviet occupation, women have been encouraged to get married and produce more children. However, sufficient support (financial, psychological, in terms of childcare facilities, etc.) has not been provided for mothers to care for their children, even to this day. With the new trends of the “modern family” taking hold, the number of marriages and children in families have been decreasing, while the number of divorces and cohabitation have been rapidly increasing. However, the percentage of single mothers in Lithuania has remained one of the highest in Europe since independence. Which leads me to questions concerning precarity (*see* Chapter 3) and care.

The issue of care marks the point of intersection of private and public matters. While women are formally encouraged to return to the labour market to earn a living, the obstacles they encounter are many: insufficient provision of public childcare facilities; policies that (prior to 2023) obstruct the employment of mothers while they are on maternity leave; societal pressure based on normative ideas and the idealisation of motherhood, which encourage women to stay home with the baby as long as possible so as to meet the ideal of a “perfect mother” (Rose, 2018). This conundrum requires the political will to reshape motherhood and caretaking, as a public matter, in which the state’s formal support (free access to services and the resources needed) is guaranteed without asking or begging, thereby minimising the need to rely upon informal networks of care (Ancevičiūtė, 2023). The boundary between public and private is a constant matter of contention, and the ability to fix or shift this boundary, according to Gal and Kligman (2000, p. 40) is a matter of power. According to the authors (*ibid*, p. 41), while the dichotomy between public and private is an area of disagreement and conflict, “the ability of a movement to shift the boundary – introducing new topics or institutions into public debate – is also an emblem and result of its power”. Keeping in mind that, to a large extent, caretaking is still seen as a private matter that depends on women’s individual resources, flexibility and creativity, this thesis will be further examining the possible reframing of the private/public dichotomy, seeing it as a discursive distinction that can be questioned and repositioned relative to the context. I will, thus, further examine questions of single mothers’ agency and empowerment. In the next chapter, I will look at the Lithuanian context, providing an analysis of single mothers’ precarity and various flexible and creative strategies they utilize to alleviate it.

3. THE MEANING OF EVERYDAY LIFE UNRAVELLED BY ETHNOGRAPHIC ENGAGEMENTS

This analytical chapter relies on ethnographic material and provides different approaches to and illustrations of the ways single mothers navigate everyday life in a context of structural precarity, where social welfare is diminishing. Locating my research in the field of gender studies, I take a critical stance to analyse intersections of gender and precarity in a particular post-socialist context. The definitions of precarity are unravelled not only as the lack of material stability and financial predictability, but also as a state of insecurity. The chapter also provides ethnographically grounded accounts on what Isabel Lorey (2017, p. 204) calls “neoliberal instruments of governing”: individualism, independence (autonomy) and self-responsibility. This will serve as an introduction to my further discussion on interdependency, which I will continue in the next three chapters.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part provides an analysis of strategies for handling everyday life as a single mother, with a focus on material issues. Secondly, I focus on individual strategies of resilience and well-being when coping with a sense of precariousness and vulnerability.

Social stigma of single motherhood in 21st-century Lithuania

“Don’t judge a pauper, a criminal, and a single mother!”

I recorded these words during a sermon, while attending the funeral of my deceased grand aunty in early Spring 2020. The fact that these three groups ended up lumped together (allegedly, requiring pity and forgiveness for their misdeeds) has strengthened an impression I received from my fieldwork. Despite efforts to succeed and be “normal” or “good enough”, all of my research participants expressed a fear of being labelled a “societal burden”, “unfit”, “unlucky”, “lacking”, “unworthy” or “failed”. Such labels push women to self-isolation and/or disproportionate amounts of additional effort

to prove those labels wrong. Although far from being a homogeneous group, single mothers as a social category have never escaped the radar of research on social exclusion and stigma (Maslauskaitė, 2015, p. 75).

A mother of four, Liucija, a woman in her late 30s, is a professional with a master's degree. She has been working at one of the alternative pre-schools in Kaunas. For the larger part of my research, Liucija was on maternity leave with her fourth child and was receiving a few hundred euros financial allowance from the state. Her ex-husband, a well-established professional, was supporting his children financially and contributing to the utility bills. Occasionally, he would take care of his three children over a weekend or during summer holidays.

In early spring 2017, I was invited to Liucija's home for tea. It was a pretty big, two-storey house in the suburbs of Kaunas. The kitchen was relatively small for such a big family, with large windows that overlook the garden. We settled for tea and conversed about Liucija's life after the divorce. Having difficulties articulating things, she slowly engaged in a conversation that is filled with reflections.

The husband left you? Well, it's your own fault. It is being said straight to my face. And that's all. You deserved it, so you have it now. And then I'm thinking... When the husband dies, everyone mobilises, everyone helps as much as they can, supporting and comforting. But when your husband walks away, then everyone turns their backs on you: 'It's your own fault!' But what's the difference? In reality, I feel no difference. According to psychologists, the experience of loss [from divorce] has a 95% similarity to loss by death. Whatever loss it is, it is a loss, equally painful. But at this point, the difference is huge, I can't even comprehend it. [...] If you are divorced, you always feel guilty, you always feel bad in the eyes of society, as if you... [a long pause] as if you did something wrong. But there's no difference, it hurts even more! And there's absolutely no support from the side of society. Nothing. I just thought of it recently [...], it was a painful realisation (Liucija, spring 2017).

In this paragraph, Liucija is looking at her situation, in a sense, from aside, comparing the different ways of separating, trying to comprehend the difference in societal treatment of women depending on the way one becomes a single mother. A lone mother who is perceived as having "failed" at maintaining this particular family form not due to her husband's death, is offered little respect. Trying to describe her situation, Liucija got emotional and shared that being a single mother makes her feel guilty and ashamed. When there is more than one child, the feeling of stigma is even stronger.

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If you happen to be a mother with more children, you are frowned upon, almost marginalised. But if you are a *lone* mother with that many children, then that's it. People just say: 'Ah... Wow... How difficult... But this is your path.' (Liucija, spring 2017)

According to Liucija, society shames women both for not having children as well as having too many; for having many children on one's own as well as not managing to take care of them well enough. For her, there is no morally "right" position in the eyes of society in relation to being seen as a "good enough" mother and as a person who has maintained her dignity. What is even more depressing, according to Liucija, is that such stigmatising not only increases her individual experience of shame and guilt, but it also prevents her from receiving support from others.

I have [pause]... How should I put it? [Pause] Absolutely no support, no close support, no daily support. Even my mother doesn't support me. So, I feel like I am discharging, constantly discharging, but have no way, no place and no time to re-charge. How should I regain my strength, recharge my battery? (Liucija, spring 2017)

Here Liucija points to the lack of support, stating that she has no capacity to "recharge her battery". Lacking the support of relatives and friends, she cannot take care of everything on her own. As Jacqueline Rose (2018, p. 32) notes in her work, "[m]others in the home are expected to manage more or less on their own – one of feminism's loudest, most persistent and fairest complaints – but the one thing a mother cannot possibly manage by herself is mothering". It then becomes a vicious cycle: a single mother doesn't receive the support she needs because of stigma and societal shaming; but failing to manage the household and family life on one's own, often, only reinforces the stigma. The following words by Liucija's exemplify that, to her, this feels like a dead end:

The circle of my friends has shrunk incredibly: out of the family friends from before, almost no one has remained. Now, I must attempt to have new encounters, build new relationships. But, having four children, it is not easy, no time or energy is left for that at the end of the day. But I'm still trying, you know. And sometimes I must adjoin to similar ones – marginalised and rejected by society: single mothers or some alternative communities. I feel totally rejected, written off, left alone. Every day I feel as if I'm carrying this label attached to my forehead: 'It's your own fault!' (Liucija, spring 2017).

This excerpt shows how Liucija desires friendly, non-judgemental contact and practical assistance, which in her current reality is scarce. Receiving rejection and refusals to help provokes feelings of shame and guilt. Thus, material precarity induces a sense of vulnerability. Being “written off” or “left alone”, Liucija feels more precarious and less worthy of support.

Another single mother of one, Rima, is a professionally established woman in her early 30s. After finishing her studies in humanities, she started working with various teaching and learning related projects under precarious contracts. Whatever job she was offered, she took. From translation work to private teaching, from writing project plans to participating in some festival as a translator or coordinator. The project money was never enough, nor was it regular, which pushed her to find more sources of income. One of the “projects” Rima took on was cleaning her parents-in-law’s apartment, which had been rented out through Airbnb during the summer. She had been welcoming the guests, speaking fluently in three foreign languages, and then cleaning the place after the guests had left. Meanwhile, her child would be staying either with grandparents (her own parents or her parents-in-law), with Rima’s ex-husband or with close friends.

I met Rima for a quick lunch on a workday in winter 2016. Her rage could not be contained as she talked about the unfair treatment of single mothers in Lithuania. She was angry and disappointed at society at large as well as at the people that were closest to her:

Now I have experienced what it means to be a single mother in Lithuania – you wouldn’t want to know. [...] There were two people, not more than two, who supported me while I was getting a divorce: two people who said, do as you think it’s best, Rima, it’s your life – especially, since I had started another relationship pretty soon after the old one had ended. Everyone else was saying, ‘How dare you? With a child?!’ Even my mother [...]. Everyone was just saying, ‘Don’t rush, you have a child.’ I don’t understand, what does a child have to do with my romantic relationship? It’s a total nightmare! (Rima, winter 2016)

Similar to Liucija, Rima here expresses a painful realisation: instead of support from her mother, friends and relatives, she was criticised. In contrast with Jeniffer Utrata’s (2015) findings on single mothers in Russia, my research suggests that a nation’s going through a “gender crisis” that produces “weak men” and a “weak state” doesn’t result in reduced stigmatisation of lone mothers. Women in my research continuously talked about social

exclusion and *emotionally sticky labels* (to borrow a phrase from Ahmed, 2002) that negatively affect their self-esteem.

It is important to note, that such labels are attached not only to single mothers, but also, to unmarried or uncoupled women. As Chow (2019, p. 290) demonstrates in his ethnographic study of single women in Shanghai, “singlism is not only about the marginalization, and stigmatization of single women, but also about the reductionist way of seeing them as marginalized and stigmatized”. Indeed, the fact that their singleness is central in the construction of deviation and stigmatisation suggests that marital status is definitional to the construction of the notion of a woman, and that being a married woman is normative. “This connection between singleness and deviancy is clear in the rhetoric used to generate and articulate the societal consequences associated with the increased numbers of single mothers” (Fineman, 1995, p. 101).

As Bhattacharya (2017a) claims, “a heterosexist form of the family unit is sustained by capital’s needs for the generational replacement of the labour force” (Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 87). Therefore, deviation from such an order bears certain consequences. Continuous stigmatisation and the representation of single motherhood as pathological is intricately tied to patriarchal ideology. In fact, as Fineman puts it (1995, p. 102), “singleness is the official explanation for poverty”, which has been true about much of the social research that focuses on poverty and exclusion of single mothers. While it is true to a certain extent that poverty is produced by the single parent’s inability to sustain a family on one income and social benefits, this is only a symptom of a deeper illness, only a premise to the discussion of the problem, rather than the conclusion of it.

In Lithuanian society, where divorce has become a norm rather than the exception, some previous research has revealed reduced social exclusion related to marital status (Maslauskaitė & Baublytė, 2012; Maslauskaitė, 2014). However, for my research participants, the experience of stigma is as real as ever. This is not something that is immediately tangible and easily detected by sociological research that focuses, for instance, on the scope of poverty risk or the consumption power of single parents (Maslauskaitė, 2014, p. 33); therefore, it is important to take a closer look at the everyday lives and narratives of single mothers, where stigmatisation can, quite clearly, be detected in everyday life micro situations and interactions with others.

Hence, I disagree with Maslauskaitė’s (2014) statement that stigmatisation of divorced single mothers is no longer a problem in Lithuania. Based on my ethnographic research, I argue that stigmatisation of single mothers is still a

significant problem, which is mostly experienced on a micro scale – through daily interactions with those closest to the mothers (relatives and friends).

Material shortcomings and what it takes to get moving

This segment will discuss class, material conditions and various ways to deal with these matters. Although class boundaries in contemporary Lithuanian society are difficult to grasp, in my research, the concept is important in that it helps to locate single mothers' situation in a broader societal context. While I operationalise “class”, firstly, in a traditional Marxist sense, as relational to property ownership and dispossession (Kalb, 2015), I also see it as tied to people's biographies and intergenerational histories (Camfield, 2002). As a concept, class is important in order to understand downward social mobility. In addition, class is inseparably connected to gender, as the production/reproduction of the division of labour is gendered (Fraser, 2017, p. 33). Women are classed by way of performing most of the unpaid reproductive labour, which in Lithuania is tied to precarity and governmental precarisation (Lorey, 2015).

As Maslauskaitė (2014) suggests, evaluation of single mothers' financial and material wellbeing is rather subjective.⁸⁹ Class is based largely on education and the social network of one's family of origin, as well as the possibilities for capitalising on these. This basically determines women's financial resources, material wellbeing and possible economic social exclusion (Maslauskaitė, 2014, p.33). However, in times of growing precarisation in general and more fluid class boundaries, it becomes less clear what class one belongs to in Lithuania.

As demonstrated by research on precarity and neoliberal hegemony, neither the class of one's family of origin nor one's level of education necessarily guarantees security on the job market without proper self-management and governmentality (Lorey, 2015). As most of the mothers in my research have admitted, and which is here expressed by one of them: “You must stand up and go, despite everything. If not for yourself – then for your children” (Liucija, Spring 2017). Such determination clearly suggests an obligatory investment in various self-management techniques.

Downward social mobility and a “downward transition to precarity”, as Donatella della Porta and others have named it, are accelerated by a lack of sufficient living wages and secure job options, as well as by a lack of state

⁸⁹ Although single mothers often find themselves in precarious living conditions, the “level of precarity” is a subjective experience.

support and welfare services (Donatella, Baglioni & Reiter, 2015, p. 290). With regard to the job market, the set of options is rather limited and, in the case of single mothers, commonly reserved for adding just another gig or non-contract, short-term job to the already existing ones. The jobs are undertaken either one after the other or simultaneously, depending on what is available. Many women take all the possible jobs they can to sustain themselves and their children. In the words of Rima:

When speaking about all those economical things, again... [pause] I have a full-time job. I work a lot. And, in Lithuanian standards, I earn alright. Not much, but manageable [...]. However, whenever I have a chance to take up some additional work, whatever the size of that little project, gig or job, whether it is for 20, 100 or 1,000 Euros, it doesn't matter, I take them all. I mean, if it's possible to earn any sum of money, I always do it. This, of course, reduces my time resources and proportionally deprives my child of that time [...]. I realised how little time I actually spend fully engaged with my son, because, quite naturally, I am tired. And here I feel a lot of guilt. I try really hard to get rid of that guilt. And I know that I can't literally afford to live otherwise. I must provide for me and my son, so we can live as we live [comfortably]. (Rima, spring 2017)

Guilt ridden for having too little free time to spend with her son, Rima is always hunting for projects, bigger or smaller, anything that pays. Most of my research participants are doing the same thing. This quote illustrates the necessity of engaging in “individualised risk management” (Lorey, 2017, p. 203), when the process of precarisation gets increasingly normalised. The expansion of precarious employment conditions and diminishing social protection further instigates the fear of precariousness and “enhances governability within the framework of neoliberal governmentality” (ibid, p. 204). Rima, as well as the other research participants, finds herself in a double bind: while striving to secure a living for her and her child, extending herself in line with the ideology of autonomy and sole responsibility,⁹⁰ she feels morally wrong, as there is little time and capacity left for other activities, including care of her child. And as McRobbie (2013, p. 128) puts it, “working mothers will always have mixed feelings about prioritising wage labour”.

⁹⁰ According to Isabel Lorey (2017, p. 204), the driving force of capitalism in neoliberal governmentality is “the moral understanding of freedom and independence as responsibility over oneself, precarization, poverty, and dependency on the minimal social welfare state [...]”.

A car with a small engine

In Kaunas, in particular, and in Lithuania, in general, the public transport system is probably the least preferable commuting option, especially if one lives in a neighbourhood further out from the city centre: it is slow and inconvenient, and at night almost non-existent. Owning a car is, thus, a priority for many people. In 2014, a company called Taxify entered the Lithuanian market, offering more affordable transportation than regular taxi service.⁹¹ During my fieldwork, I occasionally used this service, discovering life in Kaunas through the stories of “Taxify” drivers. Soon, it became another important site of my ethnographic fieldwork.

One winter night in 2016, right before Christmas, I requested a ride via a smartphone app and a tiny Peugeot arrived within minutes. I opened the door and saw a woman in her 40s, casually dressed, sitting at the wheel. I quickly started a conversation with her. As our conversation developed, I learned a fair deal about her background, education and family situation. I told her about my research in Kaunas. I asked her, Aura, whether she would agree to having our conversation recorded. She was happy to take part in my research, as she was eager to share her stories of single motherhood.

I learned that she had been working as a taxi driver at *Taxify* for a month. Aura said that she loves driving. “To go around those half-empty streets of Kaunas at night is truly enjoyable!”, she said, “Especially, because I can choose my working hours.” Inquiring why she is working night hours, I found out that she is not only a single mother but also a doctoral student at one of the research institutes, researching renewable sources of energy.

I probed her to tell me more about her long working hours and different ways of earning a living. She got really emotional when talking about her wage being a “real mockery”, while her PhD scholarship was just a tiny bit larger than the minimum salary.⁹² She was glad to be able to earn money on top of her stipend by driving people around Kaunas. With a smile on her face, she admitted that she earns extra because of her “small engine car” that consumes less fuel. Finally, Aura added that she works nights and weekends, when the rate is higher, so she can earn more. Our conversation then revolved around her family responsibilities.

⁹¹ TAXIFY is an Estonian enterprise, established in 2013, a counterpart of the well-known UBER. In 2019, the company changed its name to BOLT.

⁹² In 2016, the minimum salary was 350 EUR/month. (Retrieved January 3, 2020, from: <https://www.tagidas.lt/savadai/9003/>)

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Laura: But you said you have children! How do you manage all these activities: raising children, driving at night and studying during the daytime?

Aura: My mom helps. She helps me a lot with the children. Well, they are not that little anymore, you know. My biggest son is almost 18, then the younger one 16, my little daughter 11 and the youngest son 6. I bring them to my mother on weekends and go to work – to this job, I mean.

Laura: But when do you rest? It must be difficult to drive at night, when you have children, household and studies waiting for you in the morning.

Aura: Well, I think I got used to it. I remember the times when we had to prepare for the exams and did it during the nights.

Laura: [...] But then you didn't have children and were younger. It must be really difficult to live like this, no?

Aura: Well, I have no choice. It's ok. (Aura, winter 2016)

This late-night encounter with Aura taps into the main themes of my thesis: the meaning of possession amid dispossession and an on-going precarisation of work, unpaid reproductive labour, restricted opportunities and immobility due to familial status.

Aura's situation is defined by unstable and insufficient income as well as an additional job with flexible working hours. She is aiming to improve her individualised capacity for risk management, to use the phrasing of Lorey (2015, p. 89) and using the possible means of production to earn an additional income that contributes to her main source of income (PhD scholarship). Aura's social position allows her to manage the situation and feel empowered. She is her own "boss" and feels content with having an additional, flexible job. By owning a "small-engine car", Aura willingly seems to join the ranks of a precarious labour force: her car, skills and time become the means of production and help her to manage everyday life as a single mother.

According to EIGE, in 2019, Lithuania had one of the smallest Gender Equality Index scores in the EU (50.6) within the domain of "time". Such a low score is caused by the share of care for family and housework activities (*see Women and Men in the Baltic States*).⁹³ In the case of single motherhood,

⁹³ The Gender Equality Index is developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality, and it measures gender gaps between women and men and assigns scores, ranging between 1 for total inequality and 100 for full equality. There are great differences between the Baltic States in their index scores within the domain of "Time" – while Estonia has one of the highest scores in the EU (74.7), Latvia has a score similar to the EU average (Latvia is 65.8, the EU is 65.7). Lithuania's score is the lowest of all the Baltic states, 50.6. "Women take on more responsibilities for caring for their family, while men are slightly more likely to participate in

women are often the sole providers and caretakers, with little time left for anything else.

Aura's case contributes to the discussion of exposure and inter-dependency. According to official statistics, migration rates are more than two times higher among married people than among divorced/widowed ones,⁹⁴ which adds to the picture of single parents being immensely dependent on family ties and other established social networks regarding childcare. Emigrating and, thus, departing from the circle of care is likely to produce even greater uncertainty and exclusion. Being a PhD student and a single mother of four, Aura cannot manage her life without the support of her own mother. The grandmothers – “the reserve army of feminine self-sacrifice” (Utrata, 2015, p. 138) – are often the vital element for a single mother.⁹⁵ I will return to this theme in chapter four.

This story illustrates that of a single mother who is counteracting material shortcomings by undertaking an additional flexible job (or jobs) and assigning a share of the reproductive labour to her mother. Well-educated, overworked and in need of economic stability, she tells a story that often hides in the blind spot of much academic research about single mothers in Lithuania. It is hard to position Aura. She fluctuates between economic shortcomings and a continuous striving for professional success.

“If I ran out of gigs, I would sell my bike”

A bicycle is a great means of transportation to get around the rather small city of Kaunas without high cost. As I learned during my fieldwork, it is also an object that can be sold in case of a financial crisis. For Ūla, a single mother in her mid-20s, her bicycle is a precious possession, this is why, as Ūla shared with me in the summer of 2017, she is always planning ahead, looking for small jobs or gigs, constantly strategizing, so she won't have to sell her bike to cover her necessary expenses.

sporting, cultural and leisure activities outside home” (Women and men in the Baltic states. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from <https://osp.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=fa20eb678fe3495e89788d000bfec641>).

⁹⁴ In 2021, from a total of 24,158 emigrants, 7,650 were married, 2,495 divorced, and 250 widowed (1,622 divorced males and only 873 divorced females). This pattern has been consistent over the past two decades. (See Official Statistics Portal. Retrieved February 2, 2023, from <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=6034089b-412b-43c2-b897-922e5debde23#/>).

⁹⁵ While there is still a semi-functioning public day-care system in Lithuania, the public child-care services are increasingly scarce, and the alternatives are limited to expensive private kindergartens, hourly paid services of childminders or reliance upon the help of relatives. Precarity makes it too expensive to afford the paid services. Downward mobility, thus, is accelerated by becoming a single mother.



Picture 1. Street art in one of the main streets of Kaunas. The district has been increasingly subject to gentrification.⁹⁶ While the picture reveals the creative spirit of the city, it also illustrates the abandonment and decay of previously state-owned property, which has been privatised and kept without use or maintenance.

Originally from Kaunas, Ūla has a master's degree and had been successfully advancing her career in her professional field prior to having given birth. Ūla has spent most of her life in Kaunas, however, she has travelled and lived sporadically in other Western European countries. Raising a child, Ūla is entitled to the maternity allowance (70% of her previous salary during the first year of maternity leave and 40% during the second year).⁹⁷ While the

⁹⁶ See Valiukevičius, Jurgis (2019). Kaunas is cleaning up for the rich. [Viewed 7 September 2020]. Available from: <https://gpb.lt/kaunas-tvarkosi-turciamis/> and Tuomas, Linartas (2019). The "station district" in Vilnius: between the rave "revolution" and hypergentrification. [Viewed 7 September 2020]. Available from: <http://www.satenai.lt/2019/07/21/vilniaus-stoties-rajonas-tarp-reivo-revoliucijos-ir-hipergentrifikacijos>.

⁹⁷ Prior to 2023, according to Lithuanian law, one parent (the primary caretaker) was entitled to receive a childcare allowance before the child reaches either one or two years of age. However, in order to qualify for this parental leave, one must have had at least 12 months of work, with full social insurance, during the previous 24 months. If these conditions were met, the benefit amounted to 100% of the previous salary, in the case where the parental leave was taken for one year. If it was, rather, taken for two-years, the first year's allowance consisted of 70% and the second 40% of one's previous salary. A third option was to extend the parental leave period until the child is three years old. However, no parental benefit would then be paid during the third year. The length of parental leave had to be decided in advance and could not be changed at a later stage. The monthly parental benefit could not exceed the amount of two average monthly salaries. (Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2020. Retrieved March 13, 2020, from <https://socmin.lrv.-lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/seima-ir-vaikai/seimos-politika/lietuvoje-taikomu-seimos-politikos-priemoniu-tyrimas>).

money guarantees a steady monthly income, it would not be enough if she had to pay rent. Her parents have agreed to host Ūla and her baby in their privately owned house. But even with the free housing, she feels insecure. Thus, her daily mission is to strategise, search for *gigs* and perform small jobs (such as painting a wall in a cafeteria or sewing some toys she can sell in a handicraft fair).

The expression “gig” comes from jazz music and refers to improvised tracks (Federici, 2017). Now this term is widely applied to define a certain kind of labour. In Lithuania, this type of work is called *gigas* or *chalturkė*, the latter term originating from the Russian word *халты́ра* [*xaltúra*]. Generally, it means either unfair, careless work, done without knowledge of the matter or intentionally so, or a little job on the side, extra work, easy earnings.⁹⁸ It is indeed one of the few things that precarious people can rely on. *Chalturkė* is a term that has been around for as long as I can remember and has always had a similar meaning, of flexible work with little earnings done on the side. However, in current times with the changing labour market, this type of “independent work” (Sargeant, 2017) has globally become a part of the gig-economy.⁹⁹ According to Sargeant (2017, p. 2), this type of economy consists of a particular type of work – a series of “gigs” – to earn an income. This means that people work as self-employed, perform and are paid for a particular task and have no work-contract or social security, and thus they receive no guaranteed income or other benefits (ibid).

The “gig economy” can be generally understood as a “specific example of a wider, more general experience and process of precarity” (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019, p. 725). This condition is intensified by low-pay, self-management and self-employment, and zero-hours contracts, which, as my research also demonstrates, involves a lack of choice, feelings of disempowerment, sense of insecurity and, often, growing alienation (ibid, p. 724).

When taking on informal gigs, one needs to be all-knowing, ultimately flexible, easily adaptable, and re-trainable. Reliance on communities and social networks is also a crucial part of the gig economy. The single mothers become a kind of “mamapreneurs” (Wilson & Yochim, 2017, p. 28); running side “businesses” and having constant gigs, they do what they must do to deal

⁹⁸ In Lithuanian, “*chaltūra*” is a slang word that commonly refers to a trivial job or a job on the side to acquire additional earnings (see Zaikauskas, 2007).

⁹⁹ According to the survey results of The McKinsey Global Institute, “some 20 to 30 percent of the working age population in the US and the EU15 countries were engaged in some form of independent earning. This included around 10–15 percent of the working-age population that relied upon independent work for their primary income and another 10–15 percent who are reliant upon it for supplemental income” (Sargeant, 2017, p. 6).

with their situation. This is the compromise Ūla also makes in order to be more economically stable and to keep her bicycle.

“You must always have your eyes and ears open”



Picture 2. Street art on one of the abandoned buildings in Kaunas in 2017. It is on the central pedestrian street called *Laisvės alėja* [*The alley of freedom*], which is often walked by tourists and local residents.

I met Virginija through one of the communal initiatives I participated in: preparing the first Community Parade in one of the poorer neighbourhoods of Kaunas. Neglected by the Kaunas municipality for a long time, this neighbourhood has been home to poverty ridden communities and considered one of the most dangerous in the city. The district has been undergoing many changes and gentrification projects since I conducted my fieldwork there in 2016–2017.

Through my PhD project and through engagement in feminist circles, I came to know some artists and activists, who had been working to interlink local communities and inspire mutual aid and collaborations among the locals. The kick-off event was called *the School of Spectacle*, which was a week-

long international workshop organised for community activists, engaging them in creativity. It was a self-organised, minimally funded and completely self-made event that connected local residents with activists and artists from other parts of Lithuania and foreign countries. This gathering connected me to a couple of single mothers who then became research participants in my study. I kept collaborating with them throughout spring and summer 2017.

I met Virginija, an educated artist and art teacher in her 30s, a single mother of three, who was always smiling and jumping around with excitement. Even without being able to speak fluent English, she was reaching out to people, organising trips to the city centre for our foreign visitors and showing them around. She would remove the two child-seats from her old minivan, throw away the child-produced rubbish scattered all over the vehicle and invite as many “tourists” as she could fit into her car to take them on a trip to the old town or the city centre.

Virginija had been married and divorced twice. Eventually, she stayed alone with her three children: a teenager whom she had with her first husband and two little ones, not yet school-age, whom she had with her second. She remained in touch with both fathers, precisely because of the shared-childcare arrangement. When I visited Virginija in her home for an interview, I learned more about her daily strategies and the ways she dealt with everyday life as a single mother.

Like many of the other mothers in my research, Virginija had many strategies. Searching for various gigs was one of her main strategies for earning a living. According to Virginija, she could not make a living from what she earned at school. In addition to her main source of income, she had been selling her paintings, giving individual classes on drawing and painting, and accepting individual offers of work (e.g., to paint a mural in various locations across Lithuania, to hold a workshop, etc.). All the gigs she had received through friends and social networks. In Virginija’s own words, “You must take care of your relationships and have your eyes and ears open” (Virginija, summer 2017). Under such circumstances, being precarious means having to be constantly vigilant, continually observing, networking and searching for opportunities to get another gig, a small request, a temporary project. Friends, then, become one of the most important resources.¹⁰⁰

However, during our conversation, Virginija revealed another strategy that helped her to handle her life situation.

¹⁰⁰ I will return to this issue in Chapter 4.

I realised that no matter whether you work like a dog [versiesi per galvą] or you don't, the result will be the same. Eventually I realised that if you have more money, you are going to spend it on unnecessary stuff. Then what's the point in wearing oneself out while working to death? [...] We have a garden in the countryside where we plant everything we need: potatoes, carrots, cucumbers – everything. Meat, too, we buy from my friend who produces livestock, so we don't need to go to the grocery store. So I don't know how expensive everything is [laughs]. I rarely go to the grocery store (Virginija, summer 2017).

Virginija here shares her negative view on consumerist culture and emphasizes her source of confidence – and even gives voice to a kind of resistance to a market-oriented economy. Having the opportunity to work the land, she can secure a sustained provision of food for the entire family. For her, the land in the countryside is not only a symbolic representation of “getting back to the earth”, “getting back to the roots” (as I will discuss in Chapter 6) but also an actual source of sustenance.

Virginija confided that having a steady food supply gives her a sense of security. She said that despite the additional workload, the work, certainly, pays off, in contrast to the never-ending, overlapping gigs that are often poorly paid and time consuming. At the end of our conversation, she said that she is trying to think of a more sustainable way of living, beyond this day-to-day navigating. She wants to formulate a long-term plan for the next five or ten years. In Virginija's words, “I would like to imagine a more comfortable life than this, so I'm trying to plan.” However, since daily routines require continuous attention from someone who grows and cooks her own food, even such processes of planning demand additional resources and time.

In her critique of the English economist Amory Lovins, Silvia Federici (2012, p.52) questions the “creative personal activities” that Lovins identifies as having been opened for women by the soft technological path, namely: “gardening, canning, weaving, do-it-yourself carpentry, making preserves from your own fruits and vegetables, sewing clothes, insulating windows and attics, recycling materials”. In Federici's eyes, the supposed victory that is to be found in the quality of self-made/grown food, for example – something repeatedly emphasised by my research participants – is misleading and conceals important issues within capitalism and concerning gender imbalance. In such self-sustaining practices, where positive emotions are re-instated as something powerful, lasting and contagious, Federici (2012, p. 53) sees a sliding back into the same old “glorification of housework, which has traditionally served to justify its unpaid status”. While providing important

material support, the practices of gardening, indeed, place another workload upon the shoulders of women – yet another kind of flexible labour to be added on top of already existing ones.

Responding to Hardt and Negri's conceptual proposition for a post-capitalist democracy with less labour-intensive and less exploitative *immaterial labour*, Federici (2008) draws our attention back to the gendered distribution of such work. In her view, it is important to remain focused upon feminist attempts to redefine work and to recognise women's unpaid labour as a fundamental site of capitalist accumulation (Federici, 2008). Theorisation of housework (including gardening, caretaking and attending) as an actual *work*, rather than as a personal choice or natural inclination, is crucial to understanding the ways unpaid labour reproduces the capitalist system.

According to Federici (2008), through this reproduction, not only "life" gets replicated, but also "labour power". It is crucial to highlight that the reproduction of "labour power" "must be simultaneously a production and valorisation of desired human qualities and capacities, and an accommodation to the externally imposed standards of the labour market" (Federici, 2014, p. 92). In other words, people must be trained and disciplined in a particular way, made into the particular type of workers that are needed in neoliberal capitalism (ibid, p. 90). This particularity is dictated by the political and economic system at the time. In terms of the current state of affairs in Lithuania, individuals are supposed to find a way to feel good about themselves and their choices, to improve their capacity for self-management and to increase their productivity.'

As David Harvey (2012) suggests in his book on rebel cities (a continuation on Lefebvre's discussion of the right to the city), there is no glorious escape from capitalist urbanity and no utopian ideal of "liberated spaces" outside capitalism. "Resistance for him is, by definition, urban. It should focus its energies on urban governance by confronting the underlying power structures. The city is the inescapable and potentially liberating site for common living and working in complex societies, even while it is simultaneously a machine for generating inequality, dispossession, and accumulation" (Kalb, 2014, p. 115). I will focus specifically on women's attempts towards collective organising in the next chapters, while here I will continue drawing a picture of the multiple ways people make living possible within the city under conditions of economic hardship.

Soviet schooling in creativity:
trying to outsmart the rules of the city



Picture 3. Street art in a central location of Kaunas in 2017. The faded word “SOSTINĖ” means “capital city” and refers to the long-lasting pride of Kaunas to having been the temporal capital of Lithuania between 1919–1939. The broken dreams of many who emigrated, abandoning the city and their business ambitions to another “shopping and entertainment centre” (as it reads below the capital letters) are literally embedded in the concrete wall of the building.

As the following excerpt from my interview with Ūla suggests, there is a kind of creativity that “we received as a gift”:

I notice that Lithuanians have this *thing* from the Soviet times, when people needed to bypass [the government]. And it looks like this quality is so deeply rooted [in Lithuanians], that you know for sure: you can do everything yourself. I was born in the Soviet Union, so we had no things. I wanted to have toys, furniture for my dolls, you know, but it was impossible to obtain anything, so I had to make everything myself. This is how I learned that kind of craftsmanship [“nagingumo”], the skill I always utilise... Even when I was living in London, I always made my own things. And I noticed one thing while living with other Lithuanians: they navigate [“sukasi”], bypass the system, always find what’s better, where things are cheaper. They [Lithuanians] make things themselves, they sell things, they swirl around in these kinds of circles, and it’s wonderful, because it adds viability. Because you are always pushed to organise things yourself, and I love that! I think this is the main thing that keeps me going, because we live in such conditions where you must have...

this kind of... I don't know how to name it... Something between creativity and the ability to overcome difficulties. I don't know, if I had to live in a place like America, I don't know – what would I do there with all that [ready-made] stuff? Perhaps, that would be the next level because I would have to create something for others, whereas now, I create and build all the things for myself and my daughter. And I find it meaningful. (Ūla, spring 2017)

Another research participant, Brigita, indicated that, “If Lithuanians were not as hard-working and creative, everyone would have emigrated from here [Lithuania] a long time ago” (Brigita, early autumn 2017). My research participants take it for granted that we, as Lithuanians of earlier generations, have learned to be creative, because of authoritarian rulers and basic everyday life shortages. As it is apparent in my fieldwork, creativity is declared by my research participants as one of the most valuable factors of successful navigation. It encompasses not only the ability to find extra jobs, to create jobs for oneself, to find cheaper options and better deals, but also, one's ability to navigate out of difficult situations, to go around problems in unexpected ways.

This is not to imply, however, that such creativity – as an ability to navigate – are exclusively the characteristic of people from the post-Soviet societies. As anthropologists researching war, disaster and emergency situations have repeatedly shown, in times of crisis people tend to be extremely inventive in the ways they sustain themselves and build their livelihoods. Unpredictable paths are taken to secure resources, often produced and circulating outside of or on the margins of market practices (Narotzky, 2014, p. S6). Whether periods of precarity can be considered analogous to times of crisis, is a question worth exploring. However, long years of forced navigation, mistrust in the government, drastic regime changes followed by massive disappointments with new order, have all sustained creative and sometimes transgressive forms of coping strategies (Baločkaitė, 2008).

In Lithuania, the kind of creativity that I encountered in my research refers not only to material and economic circumstances, but also to a way of making one's life meaningful. In a co-authored article, Ekaterina Gerasimova and Sofia Chuikina (2009) theorise the Soviet Union in terms of a “repair society”. They argue that the main factors contributing to the viability of such a repair culture relate to the past through traditional peasant cultural practices; socio-political circumstances that brought poverty, which in turn taught people frugality and thrift; the insufficiency of goods and the quality of goods in the Soviet economy; and state regulations and ideologies

(Gerasimova & Chuikina, 2009, p. 61). I believe that this is applicable to the Lithuanian context, as the effort to manufacture or repair things has arisen out of necessity. To construct, fix or repair the life of an item is a basic goal for many people today. In addition, growing one's own food can become a part of one's lifestyle and a meaning-making activity that helps one to feel grounded and, at least somewhat, in control.

Hence, I argue that this kind of "creativity" may provide women with a sense of self-confidence and pride, since they manage to sustain themselves and their children. Both Virginija and Ūla were questioning whether it was worth working more simply to be able to spend and consume more. For several of the mothers, it is a matter of exercising their agency and a way to resist, for instance, consumerist culture.¹⁰¹

Finding something you truly like

Even when highly educated and skilled, speaking several foreign languages, women (potential or actual mothers) are the least favourable option to employers (Kanopienė, 1999; Motiejūnaitė, 2010), especially, when talking about positions adequate to women's education and experience in the labour market, rather than feminised, low-paid, precarious jobs in the service sector. In order to find adequate employment, women must re-educate, gain a new set of skills and, often, work as self-employed under an individual activity certificate.¹⁰² What I have learned from my many conversations with single mothers in Kaunas, self-employment involves rigorous self-management and requires a good understanding of how to calculate one's personal income tax, which is rather complicated. After paying taxes and state contributions, according to women in my research, only around half of their earnings remain. Moreover, one doesn't have proper access to paid parental or sick leave. Despite it being the least favourite option in terms of income and social security, such "mamapreneurship" is a common option for many single mothers.

The story of Liucija illustrates the necessity of an additional source of income that is compatible with the daily caretaking that having four kids entails. For Liucija, as for other women in my research, finding additional

¹⁰¹ See Gerasimova and Chuikina (2009, pp. 60, 71).

¹⁰² However, persons self-employed under an individual activity certificate must, individually, pay personal income tax, compulsory health insurance contributions, state social insurance contributions and value added tax, depending on the amount of income sourced from self-employment (The State Tax Inspectorate. Retrieved February 8, 2023, from: <https://www.vmi.lt/evmi/en/individuali-veikla-pagal-pa%C5%BEym%C4%85s>).

gigs or learning new skills provides new opportunities and the hope of new prospects in the future – prospects of both financial and personal growth. Although in terms of material wellbeing Liucija's situation was relatively stable, the challenges were many. She did not have to worry about accommodation, since her ex-husband was still paying the mortgage. However, meeting the needs of four children between 2 and 12 years old demanded a lot of resources. By way of illustration, try to imagine Liucija's worries about buying winter clothes and shoes every season for the children. Bringing her three older children to extra-curricular activities after school was another puzzle to solve in terms of daily navigation.

When I visited Liucija at the end of the winter 2017, she was taking the winter gear out of the closet and swapping it with clothes and shoes more appropriate for the coming warm season. Lifting a pair of winter boots, she literally laughed:

You know, this winter has been the best, because the size of my feet and my two daughters' currently match. I only needed to buy *one* pair of good waterproof boots. On Mondays and Wednesdays, [my first daughter] would use them to go to her [specific activities], on Tuesdays and Thursdays – [my second daughter] to hers, and on Fridays, I could wear them to take long walks in the forest, as [my daughters] had no planned afterschool, outdoor activities. Unfortunately, next winter their feet will probably be bigger than mine, and even different from one another, so I have to think what kind of job could pay for that. (Liucija, winter 2017)

Liucija's laughter while telling this anecdote transmitted her tension. Evidently, she was already worried about the next winter and thinking of ways she could earn more money to buy four pairs of new shoes.

Looking for an additional source of income, Liucija signed up for doula¹⁰³ training in Vilnius. The extensive training would take place every other weekend, for almost a year. Her three bigger children would stay with their grandparents on the father's side, while the toddler would come along with Liucija to the training in a sling. Nonetheless, Liucija did not complain about such inconveniences, but rather expressed joy at the prospect of becoming trained in something that was truly meaningful to her.

Liucija strongly advocates for a woman's right to choose a more spiritual path to giving birth in a safe and cosy home environment, instead of

¹⁰³ *Doula* is a trained woman who gives support, help, and advice to another woman during pregnancy and during and immediately after the birth. The emotional and spiritual support they provide is as significant as the physiological.

undergoing the more common medicalised procedures provided in hospitals, which, in her words, are disempowering and morally degrading to women. According to Liucija, “instead of painkillers and doctors’ commands, we have full confidence in women and provide supportive care during labour to them. They know what to do, and they must learn to trust their bodies. It’s a gift of immense empowerment to a woman, for the rest of her life” (Liucija, winter 2017). Since she also had given birth to two of her children at home, with the help of a certified midwife and her ex-husband, for Liucija, this path felt deeply meaningful.

It is important to reflect upon what it means for women, who are the main providers of care in the household, to engage in even larger circuits of care labour. On the one hand, this is Liucija’s way of dealing with economic matters. On the other hand, the prevailing role of being a mother manifests itself clearly in her particular choice of a new direction in terms of her professional, salary earning activity. Liucija had become an “expert” in care labour, and this was the area she felt most qualified in. More than 10 years of Liucija’s life had been dedicated to what Bonnie Fox (2006) calls “intense mothering”. An intense, close, and attached mothering is defined by giving absolute priority to the children, their needs and satisfaction. Following Fox’s (2006, p. 251) argument, it requires one “to have material and personal resources necessary to give themselves completely to mothering”, which means that middle-class women are much more likely to engage in it. Such mothering, as a form of social reproduction that requires even more time, attention, and material resources, according to Fox (2006, p. 243), is an act connected to one’s class with specific prerequisites for being able to fulfil it.

While remaining married and/or supported by their husbands/partners, mothers like Liucija can afford to engage in practices of intense mothering. However, in becoming a single mother, one experiences lack of time, while unmet material demands increase a sense of precarity and reinforce downward class mobility. There is a risk of losing one’s class position, both economically and symbolically. Precarity produces strain on single mothers, as they face the reduced possibility of devoting unlimited time to their children and must deal with financial insecurities. Middle-class aspirations, however, inspire women to look for the most fulfilling way to self-actualisation.

The path of self-actualisation, however, is a tricky one. It gets refracted through the prism of neoliberal individualism and the imperative to accumulate (Dowling, 2016). It is certainly true that “in an era of financialization, all of us (not just women) are expected to invest in ourselves. The promise of salvation lies in the return on investment: just like financial capital

extends mechanisms of wealth extraction across society, we too have to put in in order to get out – and what we get out has to be more than what we put in” (Dowling, 2016). Where personal growth and wellbeing are mapped onto the logic of capital accumulation, self-actualisation often means maximising our capacity to be productive, to continue accruing social, cultural, and sexual capital.

The long years spent practicing mothering – becoming an expert in reproductive work – had put Liucija into a position where the most plausible option for her own self-actualisation was to continue along this path. The reproductive can also become productive. Yet this happens not by replacing the already existing load of reproductive work but by adding on top of it. Through providing doula services, Liucija would also come to strengthen her own class position by tapping into a specific milieu of clientele, which is often that of middle-class women with more time and other material resources on their hands.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, as Fox indicates in the further development of her argument (2006, p. 256), the equation works the other way around, as well. As Fox writes, “It is possible that intensive mothering directly reproduces social class, in that babies cared for in this manner are somehow better prepared for success later in life.” So, according to Fox (2006), as much as class is producing regimes and norms of intense mothering and attached parenting, maintaining the conditions for good quality time and care for the babies/children, the causality functions in the other direction as well. Although the “effects of full-time mothering and intensive mothering [...] on social class are much less obvious” (ibid, p. 256), they are effective in maintaining the symbolic value of social positioning. The effects of precarity, in a way, reinforce the reproduction of social class (by various, seemingly unrelated practices and rituals), when higher status is slipping out of hand after the changed marital status and worsened material conditions.

As part of a recent phenomenon of high-intensity parenting in Lithuania, these practices and Liucija’s choice of a new career path allude to her precarious situation, on the one hand, and her demand for self-actualisation, on the other. However, they are also indicative of the increased downward mobility experienced by many women in similar circumstances and the effects this has upon them. Despite having a strong desire and sincere motivation, Liucija was simply unable to realise her aspirations of becoming a doula

¹⁰⁴ As already mentioned, the *birth doula* and her services are mostly connected to so called “attached parenthood” (*prieraišioji tėvystė*). However, from an analytical point of view, it also maintains patterns of retraditionalisation and the reiteration of a woman’s place in the domestic sphere, as well as a woman’s full dedication to children as her primary function and means of self-actualisation.

in her already labour-intensive situation. At a later point, this was precisely what she admitted:

One thing that restricts me from starting my practice as a doula is that I must give all of myself to the [other] mother. It's not like you are meeting a couple of times and that's it. You must give it all. But at this point, I have no possibilities to do that... The second thing is that the situation in hospitals is very bad – there's a huge hostility towards such practices. So, you cannot simply go there, attend to the birth, stay with a woman, etc., because you'll receive some serious blows [from the staff there]. Therefore, your spirit must be strong, and at this point, I am too exhausted [...] to do this ... I can't raise the spirit of another woman if I, myself, am in a state of healing... It needs time... and everything else... When the children are bigger, I will gather myself and stand up straight again. Now I cannot give myself to other women when there's barely anything left of me. And I need to give those remainders to my girls... (Liucija, summer 2017)

This excerpt reveals her fatigue and low levels of energy as well as a realisation that her situation won't change any time soon (at least not until the children are more independent). At the same time, she shows a glimmer of hope and a faint vision of a more promising future.

Strategies of resilience and well-being

A biopolitical approach to resilience

Life is the *a priori*; sovereign agency signifies the power to *permit* any given life to endure, or not. But biopower, [Foucault] argues, which does not substitute for but reshapes sovereignty, is the power to *make* something live or to let it die, the power to regularise life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways. The difference between sovereign agency under a regime of sovereignty and under regimes of biopower, then, can be thought of as a distinction between individual life and collective living on, where living increasingly becomes a scene of the administration, discipline, and recalibration of what constitutes health. (Berlant, 2011, p. 97)

Single mothers are bound to endure. By way of resilience, adaptation or surrender they attempt to make their lives and the lives of their children more liveable. I rely on the critical understanding of the concept of resilience, using it in its less optimistic meaning of the self-disciplined and self-reliant neo-

liberal subject, who, being faced with economic and social instability, learns to accept and tolerate the situation (Diprose, 2015; James, 2015). According to Diprose (2015), and confirmed by many of my research participants, by having to constantly care for, and be attentive to, day-to-day life, the precarious neoliberal subject must always put everyday life and self-transformation first, while more radical demands get indefinitely postponed.

The term “operational resilience” (Christou & Michail, 2018, p. 86) suggests that women from post-socialist regions are more adaptable and are better at coping with challenging conditions. As a term, it suggests repeated adaptation, rather than counter-hegemonic resistance, which not only has its limits but also provides little that is productive beyond the survival of the individual. In other words, while it does help to sustain existence, it does not offer any alternative vision nor a better (political) initiative to change the conditions, neither structurally nor individually. According to Robin James (2015, p. 4), “[i]f resilience is the new means of production, this means that crisis and trauma are actually necessary, desirable phenomena – you can’t bounce back without first falling”. Bouncing back is almost required and expected, to continue reproducing the same normativity, the same relations of force without any modifications to the existing order.

However, an interesting distinction can be made in terms of bouncing back after a crisis, depending on where it is that you land after having failed as a productive, resilient subject. While one possibility would be to bounce back to a pre-existing, pre-defined and normalised set of possibilities, the other, according to Michel Foucault (1980, p. 190), would be “to imagine and to bring into being new schemas of politisation”. As Foucault continues: “If ‘politisation’ means falling back on ready-made choices and institutions, then the effort of analysis involved in uncovering the relations of force and mechanisms of power is not worthwhile.” By using their creative strategies for handling everyday life and their agency in “doing things differently”, the single mothers in my research are constantly striving to reclaim their time and space for personal well-being – to “bounce back” someplace else.

Claiming space for support and well-being

In our society, the expectations are huge, especially for a woman who has children. As if you have no right to feel bad, because you must always be fit, ready, in shape, energetic, and most of all, approaching the image of the ideal mother. As if you have no right to be tired, to break down, to be angry or sad... (Siga, autumn 2017)

As Siga brings up, one of the problems that single mothers constantly face is the absence of space (physical and symbolic) where they can share their experiences and feelings of being out of shape, without energy and fatigued, sad or angry, ashamed or broken. As Rose (2018, p. 44) suggests, “[i]n relation to democracy, listening to the voice of bereaved, disenfranchised mothers is the true litmus test. The modern world could helpfully take note”.

The patriarchal model of family making, where the mother must let go of herself and continue to be resilient, hides the fatigue and neglects her need for integrity. Refusing to glorify resilience, which also indicates a lot of unpaid (affective) labour, trauma, and exhaustion, demands new concepts that can and should come forth from the mothers themselves. My ethnographic research has uncovered an issue that often goes unaddressed: Gabija, Rima and Liucija repeatedly talked about the right to *well-being*.

While resilience focuses mostly on sustaining and regaining productivity, well-being is a rather different concept, one which highlights the necessity of a functioning support system. There is nothing extraordinary that mothers need; rather, what they need is access to basic services, such as housing, transportation, free childcare and free, accessible healthcare. Moreover, they need the kind of community that would collectively care for the well-being of its members. While it is not entirely clear from the conversations I have had exactly what kind of community that would be, the very fact that it was brought up as a topic already sufficed to change the conversations from ones about individual strength, i.e., resilience, to ones about mutual help and networks or systems of support.

On being strong

Right in the beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork, in autumn 2016, Liucija screamed “To hell with all that strength! I don’t want to be strong anymore [...]”¹⁰⁵ Initially, I interpreted Liucija’s words as expressions of tiredness and loneliness. Although feeling deeply empathetic, sad, and respectful of her anger, I didn’t immediately understand her refusal to be seen as strong and proudly resilient. I knew how capable and seemingly self-sufficient she was, like most of my research participants, whom I identified as the “strong ones” (see Chapter 1). As I continued my ethnographic research, I eventually came to realise that the single mothers, whom I identified as the most resilient people, would reject that label. Gabija, whose child was 2 years old at the time, elaborated on what it means for her to be “strong”.

¹⁰⁵ See p. 20 for the full quotation.

I finally understood that the only women that speak about 'being strong' are those who actually have a choice. Only [a woman] who is living in a way where she can choose to be strong or to be weak [can praise it]. Because she has someone beside her. But when you are trapped, when you have no other choice, then this strength... somehow... I don't see... [a long pause] I don't see it as something commendable, something you could be proud of. Yes, yes... Precisely.... Because I see how high the price is. It takes away happiness, a kind of self-satisfaction, because you are on your own. I remember, when [the father of my son] returned to us for a while – I felt like I was getting my second hand back. Not only financially, but even physically, I felt like I started breathing again... [...] Then, once, I was at the birthday party of a friend's child... [...], and, you know, the conversation developed around sharing the duties between the partners in the family, like, how difficult it is to distribute tasks equally, how complicated it is in one situation or another... And you know, when I realised that I have to go through all of this on my own, to do everything by myself, it made me sick... I realised once again, that, shit, I don't want to be a strong single mother. (Gabija, winter 2017)

Both Liucija and Gabija symbolically, yet fiercely, rejected the label “strong”, as if it were something alien, dropped down upon them without their consent. According to Gabija, it has often served as “an excuse to get away from helping and leave me struggling on my own” (Gabija, winter 2017). It became clear that several of the single mothers didn't want to reproduce the image of a self-sufficient, omnipotent mother and further normalise the double (or more so, *triple*) burden that they are forced to carry.

However, another important point that Gabija elucidates is the lack of *choice*. Along with an expressed tiredness from always having to be strong and resilient, single mothers resent the fact that they simply have no possibility of choosing otherwise. In agreement with Lauren Berlant (2011), I argue that the problem of having no choice feels like an unkept promise. With high hopes for a progressive post-socialist future, well-educated woman in my research were rightfully expecting much more. Unlike their mothers, the single mothers in my research were supposed to experience a brighter future brought about by the right choices (both political and personal).

As Angela McRobbie (2013, p. 128) argues in her article on feminism, the family and the new “mediated” maternalism, “[t]he ideological force of choice has a de-socialising and de-politicising function. But more emphatically the idea of affordable socialised childcare (i.e. mass nursery care) as a universal provision is also unthinkable, for the reasons of its socialist, communist and welfare-ist heritage, and thus its cost to the state.” This is especially true in the Lithuanian context, where a sheer mention of socialist

advances, such as the welfare system and the universal benefits that have been gradually lost, often summons a surge of suspicion and mistrust. The memories of forced collectivisation during Soviet times often impede efforts to reinstate things like public and universally accessible provision of childcare institutions.

“Clocks are very restrictive”¹⁰⁶

When I came to Virginija’s home for an interview, it was a sunny day, and she was alone at home. She had taken her children to their father’s, telling him that she was going to take a day off, just to relax. She had a little cold and some problem with her foot. While telling me about her strained foot, she joked: “It’s good that it happened, because it forced me to pause and slow down. Otherwise, I would be still running like crazy and something much worse could have happened” (Virginija, summer 2017).

Well into our interview, I started looking around the room searching for a clock. Upon noticing, Virginija told me, “If you are looking for a clock – we don’t have one.” “Not a single one?”, I pressed. “Not a single one”, she confirmed. “Clocks are very restrictive, and I don’t want to be ruled by them.” I joked that only artists can afford not to have any clocks at home. “Well, I’m working in a school, you know, and I need to bring children to kindergarten and school, too, so it’s not that. It’s my own choice” (Virginija, summer 2017).

While all of my research participants talked about a lack of time and the intensified pace of being single mothers, many of them, also emphasised the need to establish a different relationship with time. The saying “time is money” became very popular after the political transition in Lithuania, when people, faced with the new economy, had to start managing their time more efficiently (in order to become more productive) and to value time as much as they valued money. Time became a new currency in the everyday lives of many. However, Virginija makes a valid point, asserting her own approach to time and acceleration. By actively refusing to measure every bit of the day at home by time, refusing to be always productive and in a constant rush, Virginija makes a move to reclaim her own temporal flow.

The way we use various measures to control ourselves in terms of time and productivity can be seen as one of the mechanisms of governmentality on which governmental precarisation runs. The invention of the concept of time as we know it by colonialism has been broadly discussed by many

¹⁰⁶ Some parts of this section have been previously published in an article (see Lapinskė, 2018).

postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, pointing to both the enforcement of a 24/7 system of time measurement, nearly universally, as well as a resistance to living according to it (Mignolo, 2011, Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012a). As Mignolo (2011, p. 177) argues in his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, “[o]nce you control (the idea of) ‘time’ you can control subjectivity and make the many march to the rhythm of your own time”. It has been shown how linear, Eurocentric notions of time were enforced upon peoples and instrumentalised in order to sort them into opposing categories, such as intelligent/slow, lazy/industrious, developed/undeveloped, civilised/primitive, etc.

It was the last summer day of 2017. I had been trying, unsuccessfully, to meet Ūla for another interview the entire summer. She had been busy, running between gigs and chores. Suddenly, she sent me a message saying that she and her daughter Upė are spending their day in a nearby playground, “going with the flow”, without any plans. “We are simply playing, come join us!” (Ūla, summer 2017). When I joined them, Upė, almost 1 year old, was crawling around on the ground of the playground. Ūla was sitting quietly on a nearby bench, observing her daughter and enjoying the sun. It was the first time I saw her so relaxed, neither rushing, nor talking on the phone with some potential short-term contractors. Upon my bringing it up, Ūla admitted: “I just realised I can enjoy the experience of motherhood. I just need to establish a different relationship with time” (Ūla, summer 2017).

The importance of time and its measuring have not diminished, but perhaps, even increased, in times of widespread precarious labour conditions for many Lithuanians. Zero-hour contracts, occasional freelancing and unstable entrepreneurial jobs require constant self-improvement and self-governance, allocating more time for productive activities (like self-enhancement, constant search for opportunities, applications) while limiting the time that is “wasted”, i.e., spent unproductively. According to Mignolo (2011, p. 178), the ideology of productivity and efficiency “denies that ‘wasting time’ could benefit the many, whose labour is being sold instead of being used for the benefit of the community”. In addition, as Isabel Lorey (2012) suggests, the time and the capacity to care for others become scarce; while the need for a very particular kind of self-care – the kind that (re-)produces a productive, profitable, capitalisable body – comes to occupy centre stage, the other kind of care is crowded out of everyday life practices.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Other examples of (self) care practices will be discussed in the next chapters, where I focus on mutual care, collective strategies and counter-hegemonic imagination.

The examples of Virginija and Ūla illustrate their attempts to push the boundaries of productivity and time-management further away, allocating some guilt-free time for self-care and the enjoyment of motherhood. Changing one's relationship with time, slowing down or refusing to be constantly governed by the clock can be seen as an act of care from a counter-hegemonic, decolonial perspective. By (intentionally) moving away from a mode of governmentality infused with a neo-liberal logic that demands that one be in a constant state of rush and self-improvement, one opens a different space for caring and wellbeing. Rather than highlighting further individual strategies, in the next chapters, I will further examine notions of care and wellbeing that are more relational and collective.

Concluding remarks: surviving precarity

In this chapter, I have examined how precarious conditions in general are amplified by a social stigma that remains present for single mothers in Lithuania. By offering my personal (autobiographical) accounts on the stigmatisation of single mothers in the early 1990s and by presenting ethnographic vignettes of the experiences of single mothers in contemporary Lithuania, I provided an examination of precariousness through micro interactions, especially, with those closest to the mothers. Based on my ethnographic research, I have argued that stigmatisation of single mothers still exists, while decreasing economic conditions and fluid class boundaries tend to intensify the sense of precariousness, loneliness and isolation.

I have analysed how women's biographies and intergenerational histories play out as an important element in women's sense of precarity and vulnerability. High expectations for the post-socialist future on a national level and well-grounded middle-class aspirations have produced disappointments and often lead to despair among many. I have shown how downward social mobility is an integral part of a neoliberal framework and governmental precarisation. According to Isabel Lorey (2012, p. 63), “[p]recarious living and working conditions are currently being normalised at a structural level and have thus become a fundamental governmental instrument of governing”. In her words, freedom and insecurity become a new dyad in neoliberal governmentality: “the state does not on principle limit freedom or combat insecurity, but both become the ideological precondition for governmental precarization” (ibid., p. 64).

Hence, this chapter has also illustrated how concepts of freedom and democracy seamlessly intertwine with neoliberal demands that people be

self-sufficient, responsible citizens who are resilient, engage in individual risk management and have the freedom to invest in themselves in order to compete in the labour market. While the current market situation is unwellcoming to single mothers, they are the ones who, nonetheless, will fight for a stable income. However, as this chapter has shown, some women are taking a stance against being called “strong” or “omnipotent” single mothers. They refuse to take pride in self-sacrifice and individual strength, identifying the false ideology of freedom, choice, and success.

With little state support for childcare, women navigate daily, “keeping their eyes and ears open”, finding various gigs (*chalturkes*) and extra-jobs that ensure sustenance for their families. While there are not many options in smaller cities like Kaunas, women are creative about their resources and strategies to improve their situation. They make good use of material resources (such as a car or a bicycle), engage in self-improvement activities (vocational courses and trainings, for instance), work flexible hours and many shifts (including night shifts), rely on their social networks for both job hunting and childcare (friends, acquaintances, grandmothers, etc.).

Moreover, due to inadequate national laws at the time of my research,¹⁰⁸ single mothers feel forced to engage in various informal activities. The mothers become “unofficial strategists” (Leinarte, 2010) who strategise and plan, seemingly, every minute of their waking hours. Such strategising requires a certain level of creativity and inventiveness, which, according to my research participants, Lithuanians have inherited as a valuable gift from Soviet times.

¹⁰⁸ According to the Lithuanian law prior to 2023, a parent who was on a paid parental leave could not engage in any other paid activities. Doing so would deprive the individual of parental allowances.

4. MANAGING SINGLE MOTHERHOOD THROUGH SOCIAL TIES

Given the current situation of structural precarity in Lithuania, increased insecurity and vulnerability generates the need for better coping strategies and networks of support, extending beyond kinship-based networks. Hence, in this chapter, I will discuss the assistance provided by parents, parents-in-law, other relatives, neighbours, friends and communities. I will examine the complicated kinship ties, power relations and the distribution of care work that is indispensable to society and for sustaining life (Fraser, 2016, p. 99). A collaborative ethnographical approach allowed me to see that care-taking patterns, which are of vital importance for the mothers in my study, go much further than the support of grandparents, and much deeper than short-term supervision. This is a chapter that delves into questions of tensions and commitments, care labour and constant negotiations.

Not a single conversation I had with single mothers bypassed the issue of the extended family's role as the primary supporters and caregivers due to the lack of governmental support. As the study by Marina Blagojević (2012, p. 219) of single parents in the Balkans reveals, "the problem of single parenthood is slipping away from any systematic government activity or policy". This seems to be a broader political problem, extending beyond the Balkans. For example, in Lithuania, social exclusion and risk of poverty among single parents is researched, assessed, and well-publicised (Kanopienė, 2002; Gustienė, 2007; Maslauskaitė, 2014; Stankūnienė et al., 2016; Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017; Skubiejūtė, 2020). However, too little has been done politically to challenge the existing approach to single parenthood and to change the material conditions of lone parents – mostly women – and their children. The aforementioned studies show that single parents are facing inadequate living conditions primarily due to the fact that they are the sole providers for the family, while institutional support is minimal and far from sufficient.

As the research by Greta Skubiejūtė (2020) demonstrates, there is a handful of state support measures for parents raising children on the verge of poverty. However, her analysis of current policy documents also reveals

that such support is mostly directed to so-called “full” or “traditional” families (i.e., heterosexual and married) that raise more than two children. Such policies are exclusionary regarding single parents, as they reinforce the ideology of familialism and pronatalism, as well as serve to further the stigmatisation of single parents (Skubiejūtė, 2020, p. 17). According to Skubiejūtė, there are almost no specific policy measures for supporting single parents, until they fall into the “risk group” or face total poverty. Only one Lithuanian policy document related to family support (out of 17 analysed in the article) proposes some specific measures for lone parents. It is the new Labour Code, approved in 2019. However, officially granted additional privileges – such as the ability to choose more favourable working shifts, more flexibility to occasionally work from home, the possibility to stay at home with a sick child if the employer is warned – only look good on paper. The attitudes of employers remain conservative and unfavourable towards single parents (Skubiejūtė, 2020, p. 15). In this regard, a single mother is often left with what proves, time and time again, to be the only feasible option: to rely on the networks of people closest to her. The practices of relying on relatives, friends and neighbours for support and assistance with childcare constitutes the focus of this chapter.

Kinship based structures of support

In a narrow sense, according to the Oxford English dictionary, *kinship* is defined by blood relationship. In Lithuania, as in the other Baltic states, kinship relations have been traditionally seen as an individual’s most stable network of support. And while kinship-based relationships present significant challenges, for many people they provide a lot of security and escape in emergency situations. However, as Estonian researcher Raili Uibo (2021, p. 33) argues in her dissertation on queer relationships in Estonia, “[w]hile strangers can be made into kin, kin can be transformed into strangers”. Hence, in these next sections I will examine both of these metamorphoses, with the special attention to precarity and care.

“I am super-lucky!”

In late winter 2019, my son was invited to a birthday celebration for the son of my research participant Rima. It was a family gathering with only a few children. As an ethnographer way beyond her official data collection period, I was, nonetheless, still taking fieldnotes, especially when faced with such a great opportunity to meet my research participants and their close ones.

Rima's ex-husband (the father of her son), her parents and parents-in-law were all in one place and in a festive mood. Observing how the children negotiated their own child-specific rules and how the adults politely interacted with each other, I could see the dynamics of kinship relationships and circulation of care. As traditionally expected, the women were the caretakers, servers, and communicators, while the men took up the roles of silent thinkers or playmates in children's games.

As she stood watching all these people from a little distance and drinking home-made lemonade, Rima tells me that she has a "super privileged position, because of so much support". She episodically receives some support from her son's father who lives in the same city and pays occasional visits. Also, she has the loving attention of her parents and continuous, unconditional support from her parents-in-law. "I receive a lot of help, so I am super-lucky", Rima says.

This gathering illustrates how the care gap in single motherhood needs to be filled by those closest to the mother. The kin-based networks are often the first line of support. And one feels lucky to have them and to be supported by them. The kinship structures, although dependent on other people's kindness and their willingness to help, become stabilising ones, granting support to the household. However, the emphasis on *luck* here is somewhat misleading. First, it tends to neutralise the active decision making and agency of the people who decide to be the support givers through their active engagement. Moreover, the notion of luck keeps reproducing the notion of individualised responsibility of a mother who is expected to raise her child(ren) single-handedly, without expecting any formal or informal support, unless she is really "lucky". Hence, the neoliberal ideology of individualism and responsabilisation gets reinforced, further obscuring the collective aspects of care, affection and provision that are vital in child raising.

Things and stories, we keep in "*sekcija*"¹⁰⁹

Another ethnographic vignette comes from a place in the same neighbourhood, where another research participant and her daughter reside. It was the first time I visited Ūla and her little daughter Upė. Prior to this visit I had run into Ūla one day on the street. Although we had no close connection and only knew each other through common friends, when asked about her experience

¹⁰⁹ A "*sekcija*" is a soviet style "wall furniture", a "mirrored cupboard", a so called "Sovietskaya stenka" (Retrieved March 5, 2016, from: <https://birthinukraine.wordpress.com/2015/12/19/ukrainian-culture-the-soviet-wall-furniture/>). (See also Gerasimova & Chuikina, 2009.)

with her newborn daughter, she had given me a puzzling answer with a smile on her face:

Nothing has changed with Upé's arrival [birth]. Perhaps, because she is so quiet and nice. She sleeps well, she eats well, she is all good. She allows me to do things when I want to do them. And she bothers me if she feels that I must do something that I don't want to do. She helps me to follow my senses. She is really sweet! (Ūla, winter 2016)

I heard her statement that nothing has changed with a slight suspicion: how come nothing has changed after her child was born? The things concealed by this statement interested me, as I knew she was raising her daughter alone. Only after we had gotten more acquainted, did I realise how that sentence served as a protective shield, a kind of invisible layer that helps to contain the façade of ease and stability. It was this conversation that I was hoping to gain more of an understanding of when I later visited Ūla and her daughter in their home for the first time.

It was a cold and windy day in January 2016 when my friend Camilla and I went to visit Ūla. Ūla is a professional from Kaunas, who has been working in one of the fancy Lithuanian resorts. We arrived at a middle size, two-storey brick house in an area not too far from the city centre, next to a big park. As we approached the building, we were first greeted by the sound of an aggressively barking dog. As we found out later, the dog was rescued from a shelter and was extremely protective of the new-born girl. When Ūla finally answered the door, she was holding her baby-girl in one arm and collecting the barking dog with the other. The place was a two-room apartment on the ground floor, with a small kitchen in the front and a living room that also served as a corridor to a single bedroom in the back. The kitchen and living room were old-school, Soviet style, not at all pretentious but rather the opposite, containing a Soviet style cabinet with a glass door (“*sekcija*”) and a brown sofa-bed. We had many conversations about the decor of the apartment with my foreign friend Camilla, who was an admirer of old Soviet tableware and furniture, something that I, to the contrary, could not stand seeing. This affective mode of aversion stirred up childhood memories in me of Sundays, when we had to clean the dust from the shelves in these very types of cabinet, moving fancy sets of wine glasses and dinnerware around (wine glasses and dinnerware that we had so few occasions to use - only on birthdays, Christmas and Easter). A *sekcija* was seen as a symbol of a decent life – a guarantee of “normalcy” (Gerasimova & Chuikina, 2009, p. 65). Despite

their high cost and the difficulties in obtaining one – especially if you desired a particular design produced in Romania or the DDR – every apartment had one proudly standing in the living room, stacked with fancy dishes, books and other decorative objects, which you could see through the glass door.¹¹⁰

To this day, a *sekcija* represents one of the most common examples of Soviet deficit goods and uniformity, for there were only a few available designs and you would see one of those in every home. Interestingly, they are still present in abundance. Only now they stand in living rooms not as a proud symbol of living the proper communist life, but, often, as a silent signifier of dispossession.¹¹¹ Thus, this old *sekcija*, which was owned by Ūla's parents, comes into the picture as an object from a recent past, which many of those who grew up in the Soviet times collectively detest, and which now often represents the very core of precarity. It often means that one lives in a cheap, old, un-renovated rented apartment or has moved back in with one's parents or grandparents, where these soviet objects are still materially and affectively present. The *sekcija* can thus be seen as a symbol of the family and broader kinship structures of rescue, which become a part of one's necessary survival strategy. While many young people in Lithuania just pack and leave the country in search of better life opportunities, single mothers much more often turn to their parents for material support and/or housing, placing their belongings in a good old *sekcija*.

After giving birth to Upė, Ūla made an arrangement with her parents and moved into their house. Ūla and her daughter were provided with the ground floor of the house, which she started renovating and decorating as much as she could. With the help of friends, she managed to rearrange some furniture, get rid of some useless stuff and made the place hers. At the time of our visit, Upė was only a few months old. Before the arrival of their daughter, Ūla lived

¹¹⁰ Some articles in popular newspapers discuss Soviet style architecture and interior design, deficit merchandise and how they contributed to the character building of Soviet era: *Sovietinis interjeras ir architektūra keitė žmonių likimus* [Soviet interior and architecture changed people's fate] (Retrieved March 5, 2016, from <https://bustas.lrytas.lt/nekilnojamosis-turtas/2015/08/22/news/sovietinis-interjeras-ir-architektura-keite-net-zmoniu-likimus-3121627/>). *Garinti džinsai už 530 eurų: kiek kainuotų sovietmečio deficitas mūsų laikais* [Steamed jeans for 530 euros: how much would a Soviet-era deficit cost in our times?] (Retrieved October 13, 2017, from <https://verslas.lrytas.lt/mano-pinigai/2017/10/13/news/garinti-dzinsai-uz-530-euru-kiek-kainuotu-sovietmecio-deficitas-musu-laikais-3012705/>).

¹¹¹ It is worth mentioning that rental apartments that still maintain soviet furniture commonly have a lower rent, because they have not “caught up with time”, did not undergo a so-called Euro-maintenance (“*euro remontas*”), instead, the rooms are filled with old-school cabinets, pre-Ikea-era sofas and armchairs, old floral wallpapers and carpets. I know that for individuals from my generation or a bit younger, we get spine shivers when we enter such apartments. All this smell, the sight of this kind of interior is somewhat horrifying. It is obvious to us, that young precarious beings from our times would never choose to live in such settings; rather it is simply that they can't afford any other.

together with Upė's father, who was a student at one of Kaunas' universities. Luckily, Ūla had a job before getting pregnant, so she was able to secure paid maternity leave for two years.¹¹² Ūla's choice of the two-year parental leave option provided her with increased time to be home and take care of her daughter, but it left her in a delicate financial position. Despite her reluctance to moving back in with her parents, as her efforts to fix the relationship with Upė's father had failed and her attempts to find an additional source of income had come to nothing, she ultimately made this difficult decision. A lot of the tensions in her relationship with Upė's father stemmed from material hardship, as it is seen in the following excerpt, which comes from a conversation we had with Ūla, in late summer of 2017:

The most important thing for me was to make it clear who must do what in the family, not by some definition, but by agreement between us. And to understand that this contribution to family life must be both financial and moral [...] So for me it was really difficult emotionally, and then, also, really stressful financially. We tried to see how much money we would have, because his family didn't support us at that time either, which entailed that we would have to stand on our own feet. So, it was very difficult. And I was really angry because giving a share to his needs forced me to "steal" from my daughter. She could have had something more, something better [pause]. (Ūla, summer 2017)

The couple could not resolve the issues and, eventually, they separated. Since that day, Ūla says, everyday life became much easier. In her words, "it had felt like having two small babies, each of whom required equal care and attention. It was really, really hard". These sentiments resonate highly with Utrata's (2015, p. 45) accounts from her fieldwork in "new", post-Soviet Russia, where single mothers would often complain about husbands being like "second children" and "standing in the way" rather than helping. This excerpt brings us back to the quote above that so bewildered me, where Ūla, protecting herself and her image, refused to adopt the position of a victim and told me that she was doing "just fine", just as before, and that nothing had changed in her life. In fact, almost everything had changed. Her daily routines had become dependent on the needs of her baby.

Had I not been involved in her life so closely during the remainder of my fieldwork, I would never have made those observations about the discrepan-

¹¹² To get a parental leave with monthly paid parental allowance, a parent must be officially employed for at least 12 months prior to the child's birth.

cies in her story. Like the things we keep in the *sekcija*, we keep our stories to ourselves until we feel secure enough to share them with others. The choice of the ethnographic methodology (rather than that of one-time interviews) has proved to be fruitful not only for collecting diverse material based on observations, rather than merely interviews, but also for building trust, creating possibilities for sharing and for collective knowledge production over an extended period of time. The resilient part of Ūla's personality – a strong, determined, autonomous woman who is always “able” and “on-track” – eventually gave way, making it possible for me to see the situation and how much she needed help. Only after having gained her trust and building a friendship did the importance of intergenerational support and social ties emerge into the spotlight.

A neutral stance is the safest one in co-housing

In Ūla's case, the relationship with both her parents and her parents-in-law seemed to be supportive, yet complicated. According to her, neither of them provided much support for a young couple with a baby. While Upė's grandparents on the father's side completely stopped supporting them financially, her grandparents from the mother's side played a key role in providing housing. Sharing their living space was, of course, a major contribution, but no other support was considered, Ūla explained. According to her, despite moving back into her parents' house, she made an implicit agreement with them to not interfere in each other's lives. “My parents want us to try living independently on our own. So, they don't interfere”, Ūla clarified. However, her narrative conveys a noticeable tension:

That works for me, because [pause], you know, my parents have this attitude, that if they want to help, they will help in the way they understand it. Never in my life did they ask, *how can we help*. And they never will. It would be amazing if they said, ‘We want to help you, just tell us how.’ [After a long pause and in a noticeably sad voice.] No, it's not going to happen. So, it is much better then, that they stay neutral. Neutral position is the best for all of us. (Ūla, summer 2016)

As Ūla repeatedly noted, even if her parents have helpful intentions, they tend to be, ultimately, unhelpful. This lack of interference in one another's lives is something Ūla and her parents made an agreement about. Whether it is because of the communist past, when collectivity was not only idealised but also enforced, or because of the recent push towards individualisation and

responsibilisation, the younger generation has been encouraged to stand up straight and to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. In any case, the distance such an approach has created between Ūla and her parents was obvious, and it was described by Ūla with barely any noticeable sentimentality. In Ūla's narrative, it seemed that this generational gap produced both feelings of disappointment as well as empathy.

I think, especially for our parents, it was a really difficult start [after the Soviet Union collapsed]. The whole thinking had to change. It seemed like they could have been [pause] better off [pause], in a way [pause]. It seemed that my parents were born to be leaders, but they couldn't change their mindsets to realise their potential. (Ūla, summer 2017)

In making this observation, Ūla doesn't unsympathetically judge her parents' supposed inability to adapt to capitalism and to adopt to the new values. Realising that it's not entirely their fault, she is more sympathetic to her parents than many of the other women in my research were to their own parents. By explaining various misunderstandings and miscommunications to be the result of the Soviet discipline and relationship building, Ūla seems to be patient and forgiving. According to Lithuanian researcher Rasa Baločkaitė (2008), secrets, suspicion and pretending had been daily bread to many during the Soviet times. Several of my research participants perceive these habits as sticky and inerasable, which makes their parents a "lost generation". As Christine Beresniova (2017, p. 61) points out, "[n]owhere is temporal distancing more obvious in Lithuania than in the way people speak about [the] 'Lost Generation' of the Soviet Union". There is no clear consensus as to which generation that is precisely, however, the term is mostly used to refer to people who were shaped by Soviet occupation and had been unable to adapt to the changing free market regime and new post-Soviet values. Generally, these are the people who were in their 40s and 50s at the time of Lithuania's regained independence (Beresniova, 2017). Essentially, these are the parents of most of my research participants.

Ūla's attempt to explain why "the neutral stance is the best" in navigating her own situation comes without any intention to blame her parents or to emphasise their failure to adapt. Rather, she implicitly hints at the history, long-term structural problems and their damaging effect upon people's lives. Such an empathetic view and tentative analysis of her parents' situation help Ūla to come to terms with her precarious situation, to acknowledge her need for support and to develop sensible cohabitation strategies that avoid

“unnecessary conflicts” (Ūla, summer 2017). After all, she admits, having a place to live in a relatively peaceful environment grants an immense sense of stability. As Albertini et al. (2018, p. 2) argue in their research on Sweden, “latent family solidarity is activated at times of need and that intergenerational coresidence [...] is among the solutions to the housing needs induced by family dissolution”.

It is important to note here that, historically, most of the parents of my research participants were entitled to social housing – an apartment provided by the socialist regime. The government took away most people’s liberty to choose the geographical location of their settlement by sending fresh university graduates to the provinces in the peripheries. Without any possibility of refusing such a forced allocation, in return, they were provided with assigned housing. This “free” housing became the property of many of our parents after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when literally everything got privatised. Subsequent generations, however, have been increasingly dispossessed, and the possibility of obtaining and owning a house now depends on a different – capitalist – logic.

Another research participant, Rima, shared an experience similar to Ūla’s. In early 2015, as Rima went through a divorce, she moved away from the house she had lived in with her husband and moved back into her parents’ apartment in one of the proletarian neighbourhoods of Kaunas. Living with her parents and grandmother in a four-room apartment in a Soviet style apartment building, in Rima’s words, was a challenging experience. However, besides being the only available option, it was also a comforting one. “To live in such a communal way, where my son could also be a recipient of many old tales and stories, was truly heart-warming. His grandparents and great-grandmother love him immensely, so they spoil him and give a lot of attention in ways I could not,” Rima told me sentimentally (Rima, spring 2017). She expresses her gratitude, not only for receiving the stability she needed in a time of personal crisis, but also for the moments of joy and sincere attention, which were important for her toddler son. In her view, many challenges had to be worked through to find an equilibrium while living with her extended family. And although she really benefited from that activation of latent family solidarity (*see* Albertini et al., 2018) while being in despair, Rima and her son moved away as soon as she could afford to rent her own apartment.

The archetype of a helping (grand)mother and its opposites

A hard-to-find “mother-daughter tandem”

Research on single motherhood has paid significant attention to the mother-daughter relationship in terms of intergenerational care and support. The tandem of two women is ubiquitously present and highly functioning across different cultures and locations (Gemzöe, 2010; Utrata, 2015; Uibo, 2021). In Jenifer Utrata’s book, *Women without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia* (2015), “babushka” – the grandmother – is found to be the most important figure in childrearing. The grandmother substitutes for the father, who in Utrata’s research was often seen as undependable and standing in the way, rather than useful (Utrata, 2015, p.45). Grandmothers are often referred to by Utrata as “frontline warriors” who help those superwomen – the superhumanly strong mothers – to manage their daily lives and take care of their children.

Several sociological studies conducted in Lithuania demonstrate how intergenerational kinship ties compensate for the lack of governmental assistance (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2011; Kraniauskienė, 2013; Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017). Based on eighteen biographical interviews with single mothers, Kuconytė-Būdelienė (2017, p. 39) concludes her article by stating that the parents of single mothers are usually ready to help and that they commonly do so in the most ordinary of ways: by supervising the children, picking them up from schools or kindergartens, taking care of them with a lot of flexibility in terms of time and activities. The help is indeed “oriented to childcare, provision of the material resources, instrumental and emotional support” (Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017, p. 53).

As exemplified by Lena Gemzöe’s (2010) anthropological study in her book *Feminine Matters* (2010), the mother-daughter tandem can be a particularly strong, emotional, and loving relationship, based on physical proximity as well as social and economic arrangements. Again, returning to Utrata’s (2015) study of single motherhood in New Russia, similarly, there are numerous examples of how single mothers deal with daily hardships with a lot of help and support from their mothers – “babushkas”. Extensive ethnographic research allows Utrata to argue that “[i]n late Soviet Russia, there were few shortages or difficulties in life that one’s mother could not help to overcome” (Utrata, 2015, p. 45).

In these studies, there were only slight hints of conflicts or misunderstandings between mothers and daughters, but no mention of any instances

of complete neglect. In a short chapter about conflicts, Utrata (2015, p. 145) states that withholding support or the cutting of ties due to conflicts remain rare. In the case of Gemzöe's ethnography, she too only touches the surface of this sensitive issue, stating that "[i]n cases of conflicts or ruptures between mothers and daughters, the daughters would find the situation extremely depressing" (Gemzöe, 2010, p.65).

While previous research on single mothers demonstrates a clear tendency of the presence of intergenerational support and motherly care, my own research reveals just the opposite: single mothers often and extensively complained about their mothers and talked about the lack of acknowledgment and support they receive from them. Despite geopolitical and temporal similarities (not only to Utrata's (2015) ethnographic research in New Russia, but also Yazdanpanah's (2008) study in Sweden and Kuconytė-Būdelienė's (2017) research in "New Lithuania"), the image of the mother-daughter coalition produced by my ethnography is far different.

The single mothers in my research portrayed their own mothers as unhelpful, lacking understanding and not providing the necessary care. Indeed, this kind of motherly support work requires a lot of individual attention, affection, emotional engagement and closeness. It cannot be automated nor turned into a mass-producible, marketable service with an easy capitalist scalability (McGee, 2020, p. 43). Paradoxically, the importance of reproductive labour is noticed and appreciated especially when there is a malfunction, a lack of it, when what is experienced is, in the words of Nancy Fraser (2016, p. 100), as a "care deficit". This aspect of (missing) care points to the two important threads of this dissertation: firstly, it shows how the mothers' neglect of their own daughters' hardships escalates the experience of insecurity; secondly, it points to the deeply held expectations placed upon mothers that are aligned with societal gender requirements. By highlighting the issue of single mothers' perception of a lack of maternal support from their own mothers, this section retains a focus on the provision of care and specific gender expectations related to it. Furthermore, it highlights the dependency and precariousness of single mothers, even when they are part of a solid kinship structure.

Unfulfilled expectations and resentment a few generations deep

According to Johanna Brenner and Janice Haaken (2000, p. 336), despite changes in family structure, families remain rather isolated institutions, "even more private than ever before, one of the few remaining places people expect to give and receive support. The harsh political and economic shifts in

the society surrounding the family have closed off the space for imagining different kinds of community.”

During my fieldwork in spring 2017, Gabija came with her son for a visit. When telling me about her everyday life, Gabija kept returning to the topic of loneliness and her reflections that the nuclear family is such a “closed organism”. No one from outside of the family is eager to assist in daily routines, she said. She lacked support from her mother, and she did not know “how to overcome the negative feelings” that this gave rise to (Gabija, spring 2017).

Trying to explain why her mother is absent, Gabija stated that her mother has always lived a simple, hard, and unsatisfactory life. In Gabija’s words, her mother possessed great talents, but due to the political situation never realised them. This, she continued, had led her to disappointment and dissatisfaction in terms of her occupation: “she was involved with various procurements and worked with all those documents, you know...” (Gabija, spring 2017). Gabija repeatedly asserted that her mother, not being able to realise her talents (and instead just being employed in various bureaucratic positions), was unhappy and felt miserable. In addition, she had also raised her children all alone. What seemed at the core of the problem for Gabija, was their family history. Our conversation suddenly took an unexpected turn to the Soviet past:

My mother studied economics at some professional school, but it wasn’t really her thing. She wanted to study at the university. She was a good writer. But her father was one of the leaders of *Šauliai* [Lithuanian riflemen’s union, a patriotic organisation]¹¹³, which was known as the enemy of the communists. He was often incarcerated, so she [Gabija’s mother] couldn’t study. She was such a pioneer, always first, always best, had excellent grades at school, she just had to become someone big and important. However, because of her father she couldn’t study, she was simply not admitted to the university. (Gabija, spring 2017)

In this rather short reflection, multiple threads are tightly interwoven, possessing a great deal of tension, caused by geopolitical events. Just like Ūla, Gabija sees the legacy of the Soviet past playing out in the present lives of Lithuanian people. By telling the story of her grandfather, who was a member

¹¹³ The Lithuanian Riflemen’s Union [Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga] is a civilian self-defence institution, militarised and not-for-profit, supported by the State. The activities are in three main areas: military training, sport and culture.

of a patriotic paramilitary organisation and was severely punished for that,¹¹⁴ Gabija insists that this punishment affected not only his own life but, apparently, has had repercussions on at least two subsequent generations in her family. Gabija's mother had to experience the direct effect of not being able to study at the university, despite being a very bright and well-educated young woman, and this, in turn, affects Gabija.¹¹⁵ "So, you know, you live a life you didn't choose and then invest everything in your children", Gabija concluded, searching for a deeper explanation to the care vacuum she experiences from her mother. This story alludes to the transmission of expectations and the burden of the past, entangled in a broader socio-political context.

Lithuanian researcher Rasa Baločkaitė (2016), in her research on Soviet and post-Soviet societies, Soviet colonialism, and the effects of transition, calls this post-Soviet limbo an exotic and strange cultural phenomenon, through which we try to understand direct and indirect experiences of our own as well as the psychology of the strange, grotesque and sometimes desperate actions and resentments of previous generations. In the stories and experiences of that "lost generation" (a common term for the Soviet generation), the possibility of choice, or the lack thereof, is quite ubiquitous. In Soviet Lithuania, even if one got accepted to the university, gained a degree, and obtained the profession one dreamed of, one would still be sent to work in some random location within Soviet Lithuania, which sometimes coincided with one's place of origin, but not necessarily.¹¹⁶ Thus, the resentment of Gabija's mother is ostensibly tied to the feeling that her own life was severely limited and, in a way, decided by the oppressive Soviet regime on a macro scale and by her father's oppositional deeds on a micro level. Thus, her daughter is deemed *guilty* for not having *chosen* the best possible life, despite having all the freedom allegedly provided by the independence of the country. In the minds of members of "the lost generation", their first-hand experiences of Soviet restrictions allows for the current democracy to inhabit

¹¹⁴ Many active members of Lietuvos Šaulių Sąjunga were arrested immediately after the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania in 1940, called "enemies of the people" and sent to various Gulag camps.

¹¹⁵ At some point, in order to be admitted to the university, Gabija's mother had to write an official letter to the communist authorities stating that she disavows her father. She did this, after consultations with her father who understood the absurdity of the situation. She wrote a letter of disavowal, which was then only used to mock them, but did not grant her university admission.

¹¹⁶ For as long as I remember, my own mother's story reiterated the same resentment of being sent to work in a small, provincial town after obtaining her university degree in the capital city. The tale of a family of intellectuals being placed in a small, provincial town where people had no values and no taste for higher culture, no wish to travel or explore, was a constant background theme throughout my childhood – not to mention, a good illustration of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class distinction. The feeling that our family did not belong there, among the working-class people, was deeply entrenched.

a space replete with the promise of choice, opportunities and the good life – what Lauren Berlant (2011) conceptualises as “cruel optimism”.¹¹⁷ The cruelty of such optimism is interwoven into the fabric of personal interactions, often invoking intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings.

So this is, then, a never-ending loop: a mother wants to give more to her daughter, because she is recreating herself in her, but at the same time, she expects much more, because her daughter has to outgrow her and be more worthy. [...] When I see it through my mother’s eyes, only because I was a smart child, talented, with a *red* graduation certificate,¹¹⁸ I had to become *someone*. Someone maximum! Like a... A lawyer! A banker! A doctor! [...] A girl must not waste anything, she has to be like a housekeeper economist when allocating resources: whether it is a family budget, or her own intellect and energy. (Gabija, spring 2017)

Noticeably, the expectations on Gabija were very high, and she did not become who she was expected to become. As Gabija suggests with self-irony, an intelligent young woman was supposed to get married, make a “decent” career, give birth to children within the nuclear family and live happily ever after. The threads of high hopes, responsabilisation and unfulfilled expectations remain central in her narrative:

She invested everything in her children, [...] and one of them [Gabija’s brother] is driving a black jeep, lives in [a very fancy neighbourhood with private villas], has a *normal* family. So, he is a sport [šauunuolis]! He has sorted out his life. And as for me... you know... There was a month that we didn’t speak, because my mom started constantly forwarding me all kinds of job advertisements. [...] And then, [...] she sends me some advertisement for a garden-house for 80 thousand [euros]. Then, [she says,] if you had a normal job, you could take a bank loan. Eventually, her soft and friendly tone turns into something different: ‘Do you even understand how you live? Alone with a child! In some rented house! You are 35!’ (Gabija, summer 2017)

Although arguably stemming from well-meaning and positive intentions to support her daughter, Gabija’s mother mobilises gender, status and age normativity based on the neoliberal concept of a “good life”. Through a range of

¹¹⁷ “[O]ptimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving” (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). It can be an object, a lifestyle, a relationship, a dream of an upward mobility or a radical change of political situation – anything that might define “that moral-intimate-economic thing called ‘good life’” (ibid, p. 2).

¹¹⁸ The red graduation certificate signifies the highest achievements at school with the highest grades (only nines and tens in the Lithuanian grading system of 1-10).

micro practices and conversations, the power of choice and freedom gets ideologically reinstated. Utrata (2015) describes a few situations like Gabija's, when the conflicts stemming from unfulfilled expectations are difficult to resolve. According to Utrata (2015, p. 147), "[d]oing gendered age for single mothers means doing well in the market economy". However, in times of precarisation of labour and shrinking welfare support, to do well in the market economy while being a single mother seems to be hardly attainable for many women.

According to Judith Butler (2015),

If [...] we are each responsible only for ourselves, and certainly not for others, and if responsibility is first and foremost a responsibility to become economically self-sufficient under conditions that undermine all prospects of self-sufficiency, then we are confronted by a contradiction that can easily drive one mad: we are morally pushed to become precisely the kind of subjects who are structurally foreclosed from realising that norm. Neoliberal rationality demands self-sufficiency as a moral ideal at the same time that neoliberal forms of power work to destroy that very possibility at an economic level, establishing every member of the population as potentially or actually precarious [...]. (Butler, 2015, p. 14)

An economically unstable single mother in the current free market economy automatically translates into a failure.¹¹⁹ Unfulfilled expectations for the "smartest girl in the class", who had to mature as an economically self-sufficient and successful woman (as expected by her mother), seemingly erode the structure of kinship support. Becoming a single mother has raised Gabija's expectations for increased familial support, however, she finds herself excluded from the circle of care and assistance in childrearing precisely because of that failure, both in terms of economic and relationship stability. Apparently, as Gabija says, she took a wrong turn.

Precarious equations: care as debt, love as sacrifice

Other stories from my fieldwork reveal additional aspects of care provision: debt and sacrifice. Just like Gabija, Agn  opened up to me about the absence of care from her mother. I noticed how in both narratives the care work was

¹¹⁹ Gabija's interpretation of her situation through the lens of success and failure is an important one. As Jack Halberstam (2011) rightfully points out, the binary of failure and success is one of the mechanisms through which governmentality operates. Disciplining ourselves and working hard to achieve – and deserve – our own happiness is part of the ideology that still drives the current capitalist system. I will return to the (re)conceptualisation of failure as one of the survival strategies considered in Chapter 6.

turned into currency, which could be withheld if certain conditions were not met. In the eyes of my research participants, care is not only about “doing” or “delivering the services”. It is a broader term that encompasses emotional and affective attention, trust and acceptance, relational experiences, and unwritten laws of reciprocity (*see* Clement & Waitt, 2017).

“I see that my mother doesn’t trust me entirely. She doesn’t trust me as her daughter nor as a mother to my son”, Agnė, a mother of a few-months-old baby, told me in early autumn 2016. It was a warm afternoon when I visited the two of them in their tiny little studio apartment. The place belonged to Agnė’s parents and was in an old Soviet style apartment building, in which Agnė’s grandparents lived. Her parents, as many people of their generation who managed to successfully adapt to the new laws of the market economy, lived in the apartment they “inherited” from the collapsed Soviet state. Buying an additional small apartment as an investment and/or a way to accommodate adult children, has become a common practice among the more financially established families. Indeed, Agnė was fortunate to have a place to stay without paying rent.

Upon entering, I noticed that the walls of Agnė’s apartment were decorated with objects from different countries, as her personal history was marked by travels and short-term migration.¹²⁰ The majority of the 20 sqm space was occupied by tools, toys, boxes with diapers, a tiny bathtub, a pushchair and other objects for the baby. There was hardly any room left to sit or move around, and I soon found myself sitting on the floor on a pillow-like bag, while Agnė entertained her little son on the bed.

When Agnė’s baby was only a couple of months old, the father moved abroad in search of a job, leaving Agnė on her own in Lithuania. When I met Agnė, she was exhausted, complaining about how difficult it was to care for a baby alone and how previously invisible kinship tensions now became excruciatingly visible. The biggest worry Agnė shared with me was that she felt not only physically and emotionally drained as a single mother but also let down by her mother. While she had expected that her mother would provide the necessary assistance in this situation, in fact, the opposite proved true. In Agnė’s own words, “she didn’t help at all”. Apparently, the two of them had a very different understanding of how to do things and handle the baby, and thus, it was easier to accept occasional help from friends or grandparents, than trying to manage the relationship with her mother.

¹²⁰ As is the case for many well-educated Lithuanians, as for Agnė, too, the rationale behind extensive travelling and short-term migration, aside from the curiosity, wanderlust, and general growth they provide, has been deeply rooted in economic circumstances.

As Michelle Picard et al. (1997) have argued, there is often a sensed discrepancy between helpful, well-meaning intentions and the completely opposite, sometimes devastating outcomes.

For example, family members may provide directions to a divorced parent who appears distressed and confused, but who does not require their input or who would prefer to receive advice from someone outside the family. This type of unsolicited support is likely to contribute to feelings of resentment from the divorced parent and to feelings of being unappreciated by the parent offering support. (Picard et al., 1997, p. 59)

During our conversation, Agn  expressed how misunderstood and unappreciated she felt as a mother, wondering if it was perhaps because she was single and did not fulfil all the normative requirements. Trying to explain why her mother didn't help her in her everyday life, Agn  repeatedly returned to the issue of being unable to fulfil her mother's expectations in relation to a "good life" and being a "good mother".

From everything that my mom is saying I can draw only one conclusion: I have to sacrifice my life for the life of my child, meaning, that from now on I have to forget all my ambitions, all the entertainment, everything I had in life, because she had done exactly that when I was born. And what drives me really crazy is her constant questioning of whether I have milk. Every day she asks that first. And if somehow, I had managed to getting back to feeling like a human being, that question turns me into a cow again. When I think about it, I get sooooo angry! I guess, I really need to work harder on this issue... But if she has so many requirements for me, why doesn't she help me? [pause] Or is it some kind of miscommunication? Maybe she doesn't help in the way that I want, but she helps me somehow differently? It's like that love of hers doesn't reach my heart. (Agn , autumn 2016)

The two central aspects of this section – economic circumstances and gender norms – are apparent here. First, this excerpt expresses Agn 's strong wish for autonomy, self-confidence, and self-sufficiency, while her situation doesn't allow her to fully embody this state. Living in her parents' place, alone with her baby and in need for assistance, seemingly makes her feel weak and indebted, angry and confused. The weight of her already existing material needs is exacerbated by her feelings of loneliness and a need for others.

Second, Agn 's reflections above are bursting with her wish to understand and fix the situation with her mother. The reasons she identifies for her mother's absence are connected to Agn 's inability to fulfil certain normative

requirements. One of them, namely, the perceived lack of devotion that a woman ought to put into raising a child, is, arguably, the primary cause of their conflict. As Sara Ruddick (1980, p. 346) suggests, “it is because we are *daughters* that we early receive maternal love with special attention to its implications for our bodies, our passions, and our ambitions. We are alert to the values and costs of maternal practices whether we are determined to engage in them or to avoid them.” The practices of nurturing and caring that are passed from generation to generation are also bound to narratives of singular devotion and sacrifice (Rose, 2018).

Agnè’s disobedience in failing to adopt this narrative is what, in her view, produces the tension with her mother. If love, care, and sacrifice are seen as something mothers *naturally* do, to fail at sacrificial love and unconditional caring, then also means to fail at womanhood and, ultimately, at motherhood. The relationship that Agnè expects to be the most caring of all – the one between her and her mother – ultimately is seen as lacking the most important emotion of all: love.

The mother’s love that doesn’t reach the daughter’s heart was a reoccurring trope during my fieldwork. In another conversation with Rima, I learned that her mother did, in fact, provide her with the necessary assistance, but that she also constantly pinched her and tried to instruct her, instead of just loving and accepting her. From the interview with Rima, it became apparent that the care work provided by her mother had its price. Rima felt indebted rather than cared for. Furthermore, the debt for the care services provided had to be paid by silent submission.

I feel from my mother that she somewhat supports me, but [pause] she still pinches me. And [pause] I don’t know, maybe because she pities me, she sees me like a poor, failed woman, failed in my life, so she never misses the chance to moralise a little, you know [pause], as if you are [pause]... Wait, how was she saying? [pause] Oh, yes, she said ‘a child needs to live with his/her mother.’ That’s it! And for me it’s so funny, because [my son], he always lives with me. Always [emphasises]. Always and forever. So, whenever I go somewhere, like I was going to Germany for a weekend, so I asked her to watch my son, she says, ‘Ok, but you know, a child needs to live with his mother’. So, this kind of rebuke [pause] is partially a judgement. Like, on the one hand, she is making me into this total victim, and on the other, she is saying [softens her voice and raises her tone trying to imitate], ‘You must consider your child’. As if I don’t do that, damn it! [in a strong and angry voice]. I don’t need to be reminded of this! My child is always a priority for me when making important decisions. Why would she say that? (Rima, spring 2017)

As these interview excerpts show, both Agnè and Rima are angry and disappointed with their mothers. They feel devalued and unappreciated, even neglected. Despite all the help that my research participants received, there remains a feeling of a lack of acknowledgement. My research participants, then, reproduce the very norms they are struggling against – norms concerning how mothers should care for their daughters and their daughter’s children, as well as what a grandmother’s role should be. I believe that this points to a tension grounded in the patriarchal system and the reproduction of gender norms and regimes, where women are supposed to take *care* of family members and control the processes of social reproduction. In the words of Adrienne Rich (1976/1995, p. 243), it is “the mother through whom patriarchy early teaches the small female her proper expectations”. The role that mothers play in caring, guiding, socialising, advising, and controlling their children, even when they are adults, is a critical one, and, in Adrienne Rich’s analysis, the one by which patriarchy asserts and reproduces itself. According to Scott-Myhre (2018, p. 20), “[t]he feminization of labour involves appropriating and exploiting the role that women have played in families and communities as those subjects that manage affect. The traditional function of mothers and other women to care for the emotional well-being of children and men has been deeply rooted in global history”.

This section, thus, exemplifies the tensions and resistances that arise when a mother doesn’t take up the historically assigned role of a caretaker and a full-time reproductive worker, always ready to step in and sacrifice her life for the lives of others. A mother-daughter relationship is seen by Scott-Myhre (2018) as containing a potentially subversive force that could lead to liberation for women. Yet, as it was shown by the empirical examples of this section, it remains a potentiality, as the daughters (single mothers in my research) continue to expect unlimited care from their own mothers, while those mothers, allegedly, continue to provide care based on their daughters’ achievements and obedience. The dynamics of these relationships, then, often become counterproductive to the task of reducing the single mothers’ hardships and alleviating her precarity.

Being lucky with parents-in-law: judgement-free care and solidarity

“Some people are just lucky to have good support from their parents and parents-in-law”, Agnè asserts while her year-old toddler plays independently in the sandbox at the busy playground. Her own parents-in-law live abroad,

so she experiences no such luck. However, without complaining about her own lack in terms of support from her in-laws, she rejoices about her friend:

My friend, who is a single mother and has absolutely no contact with the father of her child, brings her daughter to the mother-in-law almost every weekend. She is very supportive, very caring ... Not only does she take care of her granddaughter on weekends but also supports them financially. Basically, she provides the most support for my friend and her daughter. (Agnè, spring 2017)

In her own terms, one must *be lucky* to receive this kind of care. I notice how the definition of care relates to culturally appropriate expectations. While the care that comes from the parents of the single mothers in my research has always been linked to mutual expectations and moral obligations, the care that comes from parents-in-law is culturally expected to a lesser extent and seems to contain less normalised requirements. Indeed, when such care and attention are received, they are not perceived as owed but rather as things one is *lucky* to have received.

In several conversations, Liucija has mentioned how lucky she has been to be able to rely on the support and provision of care by her parents-in-law. When Liucija's mother refused to accept her youngest granddaughter, who was born after Liucija's divorce, in a new relationship, the mother of her ex-husband was always there and ready to assist. Liucija would tell me that she feels lucky to have such a caring mother-in-law, and sometimes she feels guilty for asking too much of her. "She has a full-time job, she's active and constantly occupied, and yet, she never refuses to take care of her grandchildren [6 of them in total]. She is a mother of two sons, so [pause], you know [long pause]." Liucija sighs while I keep looking at her, waiting for the end of that sentence. She makes a surprised face that reads, *Don't you get it?*, and repeats: "She has two *sons* [emphasises]. She is a very, very busy woman." (Liucija, winter 2017)

Liucija's case not only demonstrates the mother-in-law's readiness to take care of Liucija's children when needed but also reveals the unwritten laws of caretaking. As the nuclear family represents a structure that maintains social order, caring expectations are commonly attached to the women in the family. The stories of my research participants have repeatedly illustrated how this well-established set of expectations keeps the grandmothers in their caretakers' roles, while it simultaneously exempts their sons – the fathers of the children – from the duties of reproductive labour. The stories about the fathers' engagement in childcare revealed the lack of an analogous care-

training for men. The gendered care gap produced by a socialisation that naturalises and glorifies motherhood, is also illustrated by the generally sceptical attitudes to the child-rearing capacities of fathers in Lithuanian society.¹²¹

While another research participant, Virginija, did not explicitly express a special gratitude to her parents-in-law, as did many of the other women in my research, she did mention their support in passing, when talking about her children's fathers' engagement in childcare.¹²²

Laura: So, do the fathers engage in the childcare?

Virginija: Yes, they help. Of course, I had to train them!

Laura: Train them?

Virginija: I mean, I had to work hard for them to get used to it. I used to bring the children to them for weekends and leave them there. So, they had no other choice but to handle it, to learn how those things work.

Laura: How to care for their own children?

Virginija: Yeah! The mother of my little child's father is teaching him [the father] how to do it. She helps a lot and tells him all the time, 'this is your child, so you have to learn to take care of him'. I think it doesn't matter how our relationship, as a couple, turned out, but children are children, and they need both parents, they need affection and care also from their father. (Virginija, summer 2017)

In this example, it is clear how both women, Virginija and her mother-in-law, collaborate and work together to "teach the father" how to perform the care work. Indeed, the scripts need to be learned and applied. In this case, Virginija's mother-in-law acts in solidarity with her daughter-in-law, not

¹²¹ In Lithuania, fathers have been eligible to take parental leave since July 2006. A report from international research conducted right before that in Lithuania, Iceland, Denmark, and Malta (*Men and parental leave 2005*) revealed that in Lithuania, care work and childcare is considered exclusively a "woman's job", and that the innate connection between the mother and the child has been always emphasised and held forth as justification for assigning all the care work to women/mothers. Statistical data shows that the number of fathers taking parental leave is growing, reaching as high as 1,284 men taking leave until the child is one year old (out of 17,343 fathers in total who were eligible) and 7,841 men taking leave until the child is between one and two years old (out of 20,543 total eligible fathers) (Retrieved August 18, 2020, from ; Retrieved July 16, 2020, from <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/verslas/4/180549/daugeja-vyru-iseinanciu-vaiko-prieziuros-atostogu>). However, it is also well known that fathers have been strongly discouraged to take parental leave at their workplaces. There have been numerous cases of bullying, ridicule, pressure and even termination of contracts upon their return to work after the childcare break.

¹²² Virginija raises three children who have two different fathers.

only by taking on a portion of the workload but also by training her son to take responsibility and perform reproductive labour. This kind of support and solidarity seems to be highly acceptable to and appreciated by the single mothers in my research.

In addition to feeling lucky, the women I interviewed repeatedly expressed their gratitude that the assistance from their parents-in-law often came without judgement. In terms of emergency assistance, both parents and parents-in-law were named as the main helpers, providers and supporters. However, when talking about day-to-day situations or receiving emotional support that is judgement-free, appreciation for such helps is mostly reserved for the parents-in-law. Rima expressed precisely this gratitude and appreciation, when discussing her parents-in-law:

I am so grateful to them [parents-in-law] that they were among the few people who supported me and my child during the worst moments of my life. They bought us food, clothes for my son, they paid the bills when I couldn't do that and took him for walks. I can't tell you enough how lucky I was (and still am) to have them on my side. When I went through this horrible divorce with my husband, I just needed support – financial, emotional, someone who could watch my baby for a few hours just so I could get myself going again. Even when my own mother was judging me for having another failed marriage, they were there to support me. (Rima, autumn 2017)

In fact, Rima's mother never rejected her, but the relationship has been tense, as described in a previous section. Her mother never refused to help, but, in Rima's words, she would never miss a chance to judge and instruct her on various subjects. Therefore, the mother-in-law was often a safer option, someone to rely on without having to endure judgement.

Every summer we [Rima and her child] spend [at the resort], where my in-laws have a small apartment. We can be there as long as we want, and on weekends we all stay together, with my in-laws. I can say that we have become some kind of extended family, the boundaries have been erased, we are very close. And this is not something common in Lithuania. I can tell this from people's reactions. Whenever we meet a new person, they always ask: 'Who are they? Are they your parents? Oh, your in-laws? Wow!' People are surprised at how close we are. And indeed, they have been in solidarity with me one hundred percent. Why is it so, we could only try guessing [pause]. Perhaps, if [my ex-husband] would have been more present, they would not need to intervene and support me that much. (Rima, spring 2017)

Continuing this line of questioning, Rima reflects upon her mother-in-law's hardships, as she herself was a single mother. Retelling her mother-in-law's story, Rima confides to me that the father of her ex-husband left her mother-in-law and took everything away from her – eventually, even the child. Thus, her mother-in-law had to fight to regain custody of the child, and she then struggled a lot raising him alone. “So, I think, my situation resonates deeply with her, she knows what it means to struggle for survival, both your own and that of your child,” Rima shares. Her eyes fill with tears upon realising how important it is to recognise the shared conditions of so many women, from different generations and locations, whose stories nonetheless bear a striking similarity. What comes to the surface here is the importance of solidarity.

She *immediately* [emphasises] expressed solidarity with *me* [and not with her son] and made it clear that she will be there for me, no matter what. Yes. From her [pause], from them [pause], like [pause], they are much better off financially than my own parents, so I can always rely on them, whenever I'm in trouble. Like, if I really need something, or I am totally bankrupt, I know they will never refuse to help. And not only financially. Even if there is something at 5 am in the morning, I can always call and they will come, always provide, always help with whatever they can. [...] And there is no counting, how much they gave me or helped, no reminders or hints about it [neprikaišiojama]. They just share and help, as much as they can. They care and take care good-heartedly and that's it. And I can't even count how many times we [Rima and her son] were at the hospital, with all kinds of situations, and they were always there. They brought us food, delivered everything we needed, just to ease the heaviness of the situation. So, [pause] it's really amazing, so good. I appreciate it all immensely, all that care and support. (Rima, spring 2017)

As this passage illustrates, the burden of everyday life as a single mother is lifted through solidarity. While Rima certainly expresses her gratitude for material support, she especially emphasises the non-material aspect of care that reduces her sense of loneliness and precariousness. According to Rima, her parents-in-law give without calculating, without noting or hinting at the number of the various kinds of support they provide. In a way, Rima doesn't feel indebted, as she does with her own mother, and she perceives all this giving not only as kind-heartedness but also as a manifestation of solidarity. As became clear in my research, a specific kind of support – that which is perceived as “charity” or as “providing support (money, attention, childcare) under certain conditions” – is degrading to the single mothers' sense of

dignity. It becomes clear how the “tension within care is the expression of solidarity versus charity, or the way that care is mobilised as a response to neglect or catastrophe” (Hobart & Kneese, 2020, p. 7). While it may be indispensable to the everyday strategies of single mothers, the kind of support that comes with a latent contract brings more tension to their everyday lives. This, I believe, is why the stories of parents-in-law carry much more positive resonance in my research.

A similar experience was shared by Gabija. Throughout the years, Gabija has been relying a lot on her mother-in-law, even though she lived in another city. The mother of her ex-partner always invites Gabija and her son for visits, takes care of her grandchild occasionally, keeps in contact and helps in practical ways. Although her mother-in-law is not that wealthy, Gabija receives a lot of emotional support from her and highly appreciates what she calls “woman-to-woman solidarity”. They talk on the phone, share pictures, and meet from time to time to keep the connection. According to Gabija, her mother-in-law cares a lot about her and her grandchild, and she always reassures Gabija that she is available whenever needed. Being unable to rely on her own mother, Gabija accepts her mother-in-law’s attention and care as a gift. According to the classical anthropological tradition, receiving a gift inevitably conjures the need to reciprocate, so by accepting the gift, one is committing to “a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid” (Rubin, 1975, p. 172). However, in the case of the women I have interviewed, the aspect of reciprocity is seemingly erased. Such giving without expecting anything in return is emphasised as an important dimension for single mothers in their everyday lives. Both Rima and Gabija stressed how much they value this kind of support that doesn’t undermine their dignity and agency. The emphasis was repeatedly placed on solidarity and judgement-free assistance.

However, as Elder-Vaas (2015, p. 465) notes, such giving, by way of a non-exchangist gift, also reproduces systemic inequality, with patriarchy continuing to compel women to be the caregivers – to be unpaid (loving) servants by way of sacrifice and altruism (Folbre, 2018, p. 761). While it is crucial to amplify the voices of my research participants, bringing the importance of dignity, agency and solidarity to the surface, it is equally important to recognise the systemic gender inequality and the lack of a welfare state that takes responsibility for the living conditions of all citizens. With the emphasis on care labour as a shared matter, through different actors and sources of support, I move on to the last part of this chapter, which broadens the concept of the network of care.

Friends, neighbours, co-workers – the circle of care beyond blood ties

It takes a village...

“It takes a village to raise a child, right?”, Rima asks rhetorically as she tries to list all the people who help to raise her child and support her on a day-to-day basis.

I really, really [pause] am so grateful to all that *village* [showing air quotes] that helps me to raise my child, because I certainly don't feel like raising him alone. No way! In this regard, I am, perhaps [pause] formally [pauses and thinks] – I could not even call myself a ‘single mother’. (Rima, spring 2017)

When speaking about all the people who assist her in motherhood, Rima notes that the label of “single mother” is often misleading. Despite her appreciation for “the whole village” that is helping her, Rima also admits that a single mother is considered incomplete and someone to pity. In our conversation Rima asserts: “It's the 21st century and it's time to stop using this term!” (Rima, spring 2017). Engaging in a rather philosophical contemplation, she says that just as we have stopped using racially or ethnically degrading terms, which manifest racism and xenophobia, we, as a society, should also cease labelling mothers in ways that manifest patriarchy and sexism. New ways of naming should, partially, come from new ways of relating. By way of explanation, Rima provides a personal story as an illustration:

I want to stress one example from my life, which I find absolutely fascinating. It's just sad to admit, that it seems so foreign in our society. And I'm not sure, whether it is something characteristic to Lithuania, or Baltic countries, or it's some kind of post-soviet heritage [...]. I brought this example about fluid boundaries and of family making from [a foreign country]. Well, in my 10th grade at school I went to [that Western country] as an exchange student and lived in a family, you know. And, you know, that family was organising dinners and lots of guests would come [...]. And, you know, guests were coming, and I would ask, ‘Who are these people?’ And they would answer, this is my ex-husband with his current wife and their children, this is his brother, and someone else from his side. For someone coming from Lithuania, 15 years old, *say what?!* And this family was crazy, you know. Some children were adopted, some – from their previous marriage, some new children, like, a total mixture! And then I realised that *family* is something else than the blood line. Which here, in Lithuania, is all about *blood* [emphasises in a low, loud and ironic voice]. Oh, that blood! And there, it

doesn't matter. Because family can be seen as something [pause], as a social constellation of people who, I don't know, who somehow match, who feel for each other, and the blood is irrelevant, really. (Rima, summer 2017)

In Rima's example, there is a fascination about different models of family making – about family relationships that go beyond blood ties and chains of inheritance, but, in her own words, are based on “matching” and “feeling for each other”. In other words, being consciously committed to maintaining the network of support. It is about a continuous commitment to care for each other even after the romantic relationship ends. It taps into Sasha Roseneil's (2004, p. 411) research about the importance of connections outside the framework of the heterosexual family, where ex-partners can become an important part of newly formed networks of “emotional continuity, companionship, pleasure and practical assistance”. Although she is explicitly talking about queer communities and the importance of friends within them, Roseneil (2004) offers a general insight about the disruption of old binaries (family vs. non-family) and draws attention to care practices that come from extra-familial relationships. Rima acknowledges that for her it was a formative, life changing experience, that has broadened her understanding of a nuclear family and contributed to her critical reflexivity.

Relatives and friends have picked up Rima's son from kindergarten several times. By engaging various people in her son's life and within their network of care, she demonstrates to her child and to those within her immediate environment how crucial it is to allow more people into the “inner circle” and to entrust one's society – friends, neighbours, co-workers, etc. – with child-care and providing support in general. An important point, which I will return to in Chapter 6, is not only letting others in, but also asking for help when it is needed.

I read Rima's narrative as illustrating and, in a sense, defending her reliance on various people and structures of support. However, as Estonian researcher Raili Uibo (2021, p. 243) suggests, people in precarious conditions simply “need to relate to one another in order to get by in everyday life”. The decision to expand one's circle of care or to rely on non-relatives is often made of pure necessity, and I will analyse these instances in the next section.

Daily physical proximity and solidarity: neighbours and colleagues
Through music, common artistic projects, and work with local communities I met Lina – a young-looking woman in her 40s who raised her son alone

from the time he was 2 months old. During my interview with her in 2018,¹²³ she shares a lot of information that explains her circumstances and illustrates her life as a single mother. Being an educated art teacher, she could barely support herself and her child, so she would also engage in gigs and artistic projects, which reduced her time with the child and increased her need for assistance. However, Lina, as was the case with many of my research participants, had no support from her kin-based network. Her mother lived in another city. Her father had passed away a while ago, even before Lina's child was born. Her brother had also passed away, leaving his own wife and son on their own. She did not have any other siblings or close relatives, which narrowed down her supportive circle to non-relatives. Such a familial constellation affected her wellbeing, and Lina was trying to recover, while raising her son alone. In our conversation, she remembers hard times when she had to take quite radical measures to improve her situation, such as going abroad, bringing her little son along, to look for temporary jobs.

In late spring 2018, upon my return to Lithuania, I was invited to celebrate Lina's son's 18th birthday. Quite recently, Lina and her son had moved to a small town by the Baltic Sea, and I was eager to accept this invitation to see the "transition", both in terms of location as well as the adulthood of her son. On a sunny day in May 2018, I was asked to pick up a "grandfather" from the place in Kaunas where Lina and her son had previously lived. It was one of those old Soviet apartment buildings, the walls of which have been in a "state of emergency" for a long time.

When I arrived, the "grandfather" was already waiting and ready to go. Wearing a suit and a hat and holding a brown leather suitcase, he looked very elegant, as if he were departing for a very important event. Indeed, the event was significant – the 18th birthday of a boy who this man used to care for, bring along to fish in the nearby river, guide to the playgrounds, teach about kites and bicycles. Now in his late 80s, the "grandfather" was, actually, an elderly neighbour of Lina, whom she had met shortly after moving into that apartment building. She told me that she attempted to visit all the neighbours, to say hello and to get to know the people who lived in the same stairway. Out of 15 apartments, she managed to talk to several people, among

¹²³ Here I need to add a personal note and an explanation. As it happens to many ethnographers that get enmeshed in their field, become part of the community, and adopt a new identity, it was part of my path, too. Even after my formal fieldwork had ended, I kept collecting the stories and collaborating with my research participants. This is why some interviews extend beyond the formal time boundaries of the study, and, partially, why my final thesis is several years late. This is part of the failure (see Chapter 6) that I learned from and share in solidarity with other women in my research.

which, a lonely and kind-hearted man immediately offered his assistance and, thereafter, continuously participated in her and her son's life. According to Lina, this man, unrelated by blood ties, became closer than any of her real kin. Living nearby and paying close attention, listening, and responding to their needs he provided her much more help than any of her other relatives could offer. Indeed, the care work and the allocation of resources, such as time, attention, and energy, made up the core of their close relationship. Even her referring to this elderly neighbour as "grandfather" signals the closeness and the significance of this relationship (*see* Uibo 2021).

Although I had heard Lina tell stories about this "grandfather" many times before, this was the first time I had met him. Now, the two-and-a-half-hour trip to the seashore gave us plenty of time to talk. The "grandfather" shared with me his 17 years of memories of his relationship with Lina and her son. With tears in his eyes, he told me how Lina's son became like a grandchild to him and how proud he was of Lina that she managed so well and raised such a sensitive, smart and kind-hearted young man. This day was a truly significant event for him. And although he could barely walk and had pretty much lost his sight, he got himself a haircut, put on his best suit and went on this long trip to congratulate his "grandson" and his mother.

Another similar example shows how single mothers do not necessarily seek, but rather organically establish, close connections with their neighbours. As Lina's case revealed, the physical proximity often gets complimented by an emotional closeness.

One summer afternoon, we were sitting on a bench in front of the house that Gabija was renting an apartment in. The neighbour who lived in the house in front of hers passed by, and Gabija exchanged several warm sentences with her. When the woman was at a distance from us, Gabija, suddenly changed the subject we were engaged in and started telling me how much this neighbour had helped her. Whenever Gabija needed to go somewhere quickly, she would ask the neighbour to keep an eye on her son, and never once did she refuse. On the contrary, she always seemed to be ready to help and had become another "aunty", who is close and caring.

Importantly, again, this relationship, which is not based on biological kinship, has the intensity and even the terminology of such. Gabija and her son found themselves calling this neighbour "aunty", and no matter the manner of support she provided to Gabija's family, it never had any implications of "exchange", "gain" or "calculation". In addition, this interaction did not contain any judgement or paternalistic power, which often characterize more expectation-based blood relationships. A different logic manifests itself

here that seems to be based on proximity, trust, care, empathy, and solidarity. The participants in my study make an important distinction between “charity” or “paternalistic advising”, on the one hand, and solidarity, on the other. According to Hobart and Kneese (2020, p. 10), *charity* is still primarily connected to the “neoliberal discourses of moral obligation” and plays on the register of individual will, while *solidarity* seems to be much more about communal engagement, being attentive to the needs of others, asking and listening, discussing, and giving without wanting anything in return. Throughout my research, the single mothers who took part in my research continuously noted and emphasised the significance of these solitary relations.

Rima also stressed the importance of empathy and solidarity. As she had changed apartments so often (moving in with and away from her partner and parents), the people who were constantly present and physically close to her were not the neighbours but rather her colleagues. She wanted “to emphasise as much as possible” how important it is to trust people and allow them to join in, to help with the care work, and for her not to feel victimised by this.

I get so much support and assistance from my colleagues. It involves a variety of forms: from giving me a lift to watching [my son] at work when I have been forced to bring him along with me. From offering simple ideas that would ease my worries to elaborate suggestions. For instance, if [my son] has some important occasion next morning, they [Rima’s co-workers] would encourage me to leave work earlier to be able to buy some things or prepare his festive clothes. Like [thinking], it’s insane how much they support me in my daily life! And it’s precisely [...] why I want to stress it again! For example, my boss is a man and it’s so interesting that [...] he is absolutely empathetic towards me and so understanding. He loves [my son] and whenever my son is at work with me, he would take him to play some games, to show him some experiments, etc. Like, he would totally engage with my child and play with him. Or the [janitor at my work]. She always has some ice cream in the fridge, so when I bring [my son] to work, she always takes him by his hand and off they go for ice cream, so I can finish some things [work]. Imagine... So, they have become like my mini-family. My co-worker with whom I share an office, she is also incredibly understanding! She [pause], you know [pause], had a really difficult life, too. Her husband [has an issue] and she practically raised her children alone, so she can really relate. And she always tells me, ‘I know how you feel’. And she allows me to leave earlier, gives me a lift or helps with something. Also, the janitor is always bringing homemade eggs, and says, ‘Take them for your little [son]’. [...] I’m amazed how much solidarity I feel from all these people. Everyone is helping, everyone is supporting in whatever

way they can. And then I start thinking, I'm not disadvantaged, I'm immensely blessed! And I feel so grateful. (Rima, spring 2017)

This narrative reveals Rima's amazement about all the help and support that she receives as a single mother. Everyone, including her *male* boss, as she stresses, is supportive, caring and in solidarity with her. Their subversion of normative standards in terms of gendered care work and the (close/distant) relatedness to people, provides her with both a sense of gratitude and astonishment. Rima is in awe that in this formal, work-related context such caring relationships can be produced daily. As Rima was unable to receive any such attitude and engaged participation from her son's father, these acts of care and kindness appeared surprising and extremely significant to her.

On the other hand, Rima's surprise with how much unrelated people can care and be willing to help, exposes the power of existing normative expectations, which, in this case, are mostly tied to the biological family and to heteronormativity. It shows the limits of our imagination in terms of how little we expect from our communities and people outside the family networks.

Making all the hidden care work that is embedded in raising a child more visible to others whom one is close with, besides one's relatives, can also serve to elucidate normative assumptions and the difficulties of meeting expectations. As Lise Vogel argued during her lecture in Zagreb, Croatia, in May 2015, "the concept of reproduction of labour power can be freed from normative assumptions concerning biological procreation in heterosexual family contexts. Although the reproduction of labour power in actual societies has usually involved childrearing within kin settings called families, it can be organised in other ways at least for a period." Indeed, as my research shows, reproductive labour can be and, sometimes, is shared differently – more collectively, relying on neighbours and co-workers. It acknowledges the value of extra-familial relationships, the care and support from others that challenge the familialism (Roseneil, 2004, p. 415), and in turn offers a new perspective on social reproduction, care, and everyday strategies. Along with other feminist thinkers, such as Bhattacharya (2017a), Roseneil (2004), and Vogel (1983/2013), I argue that acknowledging and imagining other sources of care and forms of organisation beyond conventional norms is vital in building and sustaining those kinds of alternative networks of care.

Friends who help and define us

Every single one of my research participants emphasised the importance of friends and the multi-layered support that they provide. For Ūla, friends are those who help in daily situations, who assist with childcare or exchange goods and services without any financial transaction. For example, she told me about one friend, who agreed to babysit her little daughter for a couple of hours per week in exchange for a particular kind of massage that Ūla knew how to give. “This kind of *trade* [emphasises] makes us both happy”, Ūla smiles. However, what she highlights even more, is that her friends represent a guiding force, some kind of ethical benchmark, a point of reference. It is a social network that one aspires to level-up to, to feel equal to, and close enough to in terms of views and shared values. As Ūla explains:

[t]he environment which surrounds me, for example, friends, who are, in a way, atypical, much travelled, very open minded, like yourself, right? – they always find some way to go around. So, this really gives me a lot of strength and support. If only for them [pause]... I couldn't [pauses and thinks]. How to say it? [pauses for a while in search for words]. The standards in my friends' circles are very high, so I couldn't, for example, live from the welfare benefits or something [pause]. There is this awareness that we can do it all with our own means, with our own hands. And I have friends who started from scratch and now they have international companies up and running, and such examples give me hope that one can make it on her own. (Ūla, summer 2017).

In this excerpt, the everyday struggles are apparent. When talking about inspiration and the indirect support that she receives, Ūla weighs two options: to either live on welfare support (which means a precarious and financially poor life) or to do whatever it takes to build her life “from scratch”, like her friends have done. Evidently, there is a lot of emphasis here on the individual's (positive) attitude and on the individual's own effort for a better life. And for that, the acknowledgement of friendships is vital. In contrast with many research participants who needed to prove their worth to their mothers, Ūla's aim was to level-up to her “open minded”, successful friends. It is her measuring stick when looking for new opportunities and when aiming for greater achievements. Rather than talking about actual help, Ūla stresses the inspiration, strength and non-material support friends provide her with. It is meaningful to illuminate the tension this presents: by way of their successful examples, Ūla's friends set the standard of living that she aspires to – a standard which is rarely attainable for several of the single mothers in my research.

As Hobart and Kneese (2020, p. 13) point out, “[w]e have been thought to valorise and glamorise other activities – giving speeches, passing legislation, bringing lawsuits, organising marches – and to discount, not notice, not care about care labor”. Ūla’s aim for independence, self-sufficiency, and high performance despite her being a single mother is precisely what intensifies the tension. Ūla feels that in her friends’ eyes she will be valorised for finding solutions, for earning money (instead of asking for benefits from the government), for growing her own “healthy food” and, only then, for being a good, nurturing mother. The biggest workload that she is currently undertaking – the care labour – is not being adequately addressed here. Only later in our conversation did Ūla indirectly admit that raising a toddler alone somewhat hinders her from certain activities, or, as she put it, “there is a need for meticulous planning in advance” (Ūla, summer 2017). From the way she describes her current routines with her daughter, who doesn’t attend kindergarten yet, it is easy to recognise that the possibility of her ever reaching the high standards exhibited by her friends is limited by piles of semi-visible reproductive labour.

And yet, close friendships and significant affiliations not only uplift Ūla, but also provide a sense of community and belonging, which single mothers often lack – especially when faced with stigmatisation and/or rejection from their own blood families and the fathers of their children. Friends provide a stabilising as well as a reassuring bond that helps one to navigate everyday life as a single mother. Several of my research participants expressed their deep gratitude to their friends, who provided them with a kind of support that is non-judgemental and, in their words, free of “guilt-tripping”.

In line with Ūla’s case, Virginija’s story talks about “losing” some friends along the way, when their paths had diverged. While drinking tea with Virginija at her place in the summer of 2017, I learned about her circle of care and the significance of friends in her daily life.

Laura: So, would you say then that you have some kind of community of people who support and help you?

Virginija: Well, I don’t know [pause]. It’s more like my friends who help. When you are growing and changing all the time, people around you are also changing. There is no such thing as an established community. It’s more people who think alike. [...] In my environment, there are no people any longer who would constantly nag or complain about everything. Those friends somehow disappeared [“atsisijojo”]. Changed [pause]. Anyhow, you become surrounded by people who are more like you. More positive. [...]

Sometimes, it's a truly magical sensation, it feels like a family. Really, it's a wonderful feeling! (Virginija, summer 2017)

There are two vivid aspects to this excerpt. Firstly is Virginija's grounding in positive thinking and an optimistic mindset, that helps her to focus on the brighter side of life and "attract positive things" (Virginija, summer 2017). Secondly, along with this rather individualising self-help approach, Virginija stresses the importance of friends who are alike and who form a community that "feels like a family". This kind of affinity and positivity that connects them is encouraging, supportive and reaffirming of Virginija's identity. When being supported by like-minded friends she feels fine (Virginija, summer 2017). Full of optimism, she defines herself as being detached from those "who drink alcohol and then fight".

In Virginija's narrative, this aspect of friendship was emphasised several times. Instead of reciprocity, she stressed giving without asking anything in return. According to Narotzky and Besnier (2014, p. S5), the expansion of market principles has penetrated most spheres of our life, including social domains, where "exchange and calculability have increasingly become issues that anthropologists have had to address in order to conceptualise value and valuation processes". The problem seems to become magnified when affective relations become the site of commodification and evaluation in a capitalist sense. When capital penetrates the affective registers of social life, the relationships and friendships get instrumentalised and commodified. According to Dowling (2016), the meaningful experiences and authentic connections with others are replaced by alienation. And "[h]ow frustrating and exhausting then, that our encounters are shaped more like transactions, in which we put each other to work to satisfy what we think it is that we need" (ibid).

A story of the house that Virginija and her family reside in is a good illustration of a counter-hegemonic approach. Talking about housing, Virginija expressed her excitement about her plan to move to the countryside and build a house on a tiny piece of land that she managed to buy. After my inquiry as to whether she was going to sell this house, Virginija explained:

This house is not mine – it's my friend's. I have another small house, but in that house lives [...] a friend of my friend. Meanwhile, I live in my friend's house. [...] My house is also in the same neighbourhood, but it's really small. We were really cramped in there. I gave one room to my oldest daughter, while me and my two little ones had to fit into another room. That was really tight. And it then just so happened that my friend moved away to another [far

off] town. She offered to let me use her house as an [art] studio. I came, looked around, started cleaning and arranging things to make it into a studio. Once I stayed overnight to finish cleaning, and then she called me and asked: “So maybe you want to live there?” I said, “Sure!” So, it happened. We [Virginija and her children] arrived, cleaned up and settled in. Now we live here so amply, with plenty of space. (Virginija, summer 2017)

It is worth noting how this exchange happened simply, without contracts, bills or profit-based agreements. For Virginija, it was “just natural” to exchange living spaces, according to everyone’s needs rather than financial capacities or potential gains. She rejoiced that her friend, who is financially stable, did not even charge her rent. Virginija and her family financially cover the utilities, and they can simply use the house as their own. In the same way, a friend of a friend lives in her house. It is an illuminating example not only of a counter-hegemonic way of solving problems in a free market economy, but also of decolonising normative relationships and proving the possibility of extended families and close relationships beyond blood ties. The meaning of friendship is expanded in such a way as to overcome capitalist demands for profit. Virginija expressed her happiness at being allowed to live in this place as long as her family needs it, and that, after selling her own (inherited) house, she plans to move away from the city and build a new house on her own land. A community of friends and acquaintances is there, she says. People are settling in, “so it will feel like coming home”, she concluded (Virginija, summer 2017).

The interviews with Virginija and Ūla helped me to rethink friendship, emphasising “the extent to which, often as a matter of preference, people are substituting the ties of friendship for those of blood, particularly in terms of everyday care and emotional support” (Roseneil, 2004, p. 413). Indeed, in my research, friendships proved to be an important source of inspiration, emotional care, and material and non-material support in the everyday lives of single mothers. Friendships proved to be valuable not only because they can elevate women from a difficult situation and reduce their sense of precariousness, but also, because they can do so without infringing upon their sense of autonomy and dignity.

Concluding remarks: it takes a village to raise a child

In this chapter, I have analysed the importance of various support givers from one’s immediate environment and networks of care. Ethnographic examples and interview excerpts show that while single mothers initially tend to rely

on connections to their parents and parents-in-law, ultimately a lot of help and care, in fact, comes from outside the kinship structures. Along with exposing networks and mechanisms of social support, the chapter also discloses the lack of it. In addition, I argue, that the various levels of appreciation the mothers in my study show for the assistance they have received in filling the care gap directly correlates with deeply held cultural expectations that women tend to place on various social actors within their network of care. The assistance received from people who were neither seen as required nor expected to step in often seemed to be much more acknowledged and appreciated.

The most common mode of kin-based support for daughters from their parents was the provision of housing. Although sometimes taken for granted or perceived as a restraining contract with the parents, free housing proved to play a crucial role in single mothers' lives, creating a major stabilising force. However, in contrast with other similar research on single motherhood (Utrata, 2015; Yazdanpanah, 2008; Kuconytė-Būdelienė, 2017), my research has exposed that kinship-based relationships provide not only care, but also expectation-based tensions. A common friction is generated, when the grandmothers (the single mother's mothers) refuse to provide the expected assistance, unconditional love and unlimited care. Contrary to cultural expectations and popular images of an always-ready-to-help mother and a nearly sacred mother-daughter tandem, in my research, biological relatedness didn't easily translate into an abundance of care and unconditional support. The tensions expressed by my research participants effectively elucidated some deeply held gendered assumptions and expectations, which produced a sense of injustice and neglect. Feelings of confusion and resentment were expressed by my research participants through rhetorical questions, such as "Why does she not help in a way I need?" (Agnė, Liucija), and "Why doesn't she ask how to help?" (Rima, Ūla). What my research participants interpreted as their mothers' refusal to assist, can be also seen as their mother's exercising their agency and micro resistance to gendered expectations.

This chapter has also shown how the grandmothers did help in their own ways (by providing housing, irregular childcare or unsolicited advice). However, situations of co-residence with parents were defined in emotionally charged terms, disclosing decades of familial histories and complicated kinship relations that speak about situated experiences and power relations in caretaking, and were referred to as being sacrificial, controlling and governing. Living with parents was often portrayed as tinted by a sense of the discrepancy

between the well-meaning intentions of the grandparents and the actual tension-producing outcomes. The stories shared by Agnè, Rima, Ūla, Lina and Gabija exposed the single mothers' need for autonomy, for "doing well in life" viewed according to neoliberal conceptions of success and self-sufficiency. The narratives of parental help highlighted the price women must pay for accepting this help, revealing the ways they navigate and negotiate inner contradictions, a sense of failure in their aspirations for autonomy and freedom in situations produced by the "aims and effects of neoliberal forms of social and economic life" (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 21).

Another major point of focus in this analytical chapter was the engagement of mothers-in-law as providing significant support and solidarity. These close relationships, offering financial, material and emotional support, often on a daily basis, were perceived as judgment-free, entailing no need to reciprocate and as not loaded with expectations. In addition, people not related by blood were specified as the source of immense help, emotional support, inspiration and daily attentiveness. Neighbours, friends and co-workers were particularly praised for being there in intense moments or for offering unexpected and unimagined kinds of help. My research revealed hidden stories of friends aiding with childcare, providing various services and goods, and even exchanging houses, all of which contributed to reducing a sense of precariousness. Free of expectations, demands and, ultimately, disappointments, friendships and caring relationships with people in physical proximity (neighbours and colleagues) were especially appreciated, as they produced a sense of solidarity and increased the women's sense of agency and autonomy.

As Utrata (2015, p. 51) points out, "[m]ost people prefer not to dwell on the intractable problems that are sadly just as much a part of family life as feelings of closeness, solidarity, or even tight intergenerational support systems". This chapter illustrates how empathy, support and solidarity are offered by people who are in close physical or emotional proximity to my research participants. Even when problems and conflicts arise, there is often a lot of appreciation for and acknowledgement of the networks of care that help the single mothers navigate and manage their everyday life. Whether the care work is noted and valued, or whether it remains invisible and "highly priced", the overall argument that I make in this chapter is that absolute *singleness* is rarely the case.

5. INVERTING FAILURE: FROM COPING MECHANISMS TO EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

The components of failure: guilt, shame and worthlessness

The concept of failure has been briefly discussed in previous chapters in terms of failed marriage, perceived lack of support from the single mothers' own mothers, disintegration of previous friendships and the absence of stable structures of support. In this chapter I will examine the narratives of a "failed" mother and analyse how the acknowledged and shared sense of failure can become a source of power. As I have already analysed strategies related to close networks of care, emphasising resilience and positive attitudes, here I want to make space for the stories and feelings related to failure and tease out the transformative effects that de-individualising one's failure can bring. I will provide ethnographic examples and interview excerpts on how sharing and making one's vulnerabilities visible can help to rethink practices of mothering by positioning personal and private experiences in a collective and political realm. By analysing tensions between failure, care and empowerment in the single mothers' narratives, I suggest that accepting one's failure as collective and structural helps single mothers to handle difficult situations and to empower themselves. Hence, acknowledging that inequality is maintained through unjust distribution of reproductive labour, this study contributes to feminist discussions on social reproduction by highlighting narratives of failure as an active agent in a collective process of de-stigmatisation of single motherhood. I also demonstrate how acknowledging and collectively embracing (maternal) failure can serve as a transformative, politicising force that contributes to feminist knowledge production and solidarity.

Introducing maternal failure

"You see, I'm already a failure. I could not be a good enough mother and a partner to convince him to stay" (Gabija, winter 2017). This quote by Gabija illuminates how most of my researcher participants felt about themselves at

the point of becoming a single mother. The mere fact that single mothers in Lithuania are mostly discussed in terms of social exclusion and in need of welfare aid, makes it clear that in the eyes of society they have failed. For single mothers, it is difficult to escape (self-)judgement, regardless of the quality of their performance of motherhood. The devotion to children, then, must compensate for broken families, leaving no opportunity to fail again.

The insistence that one's success depends mainly on hard and earnest work, while failure is one's own responsibility, helps to maintain productive and self-improving citizens. Mothers need to be especially diligent at performing motherhood. While the effort itself is never an individual one (as demonstrated in Chapter 4), the responsibility for failures is often individualised and internalised. Relying on Barbara Ehrenreich, Jack Halberstam (2011, p. 3), notes that there is a certain "mass delusion" that reinforces "a desire to believe that success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions".

According to Jacqueline Rose (2018, p. 46), "radical care and [the] visceral mess of child-rearing" must not escape the private sphere and enter the domain of public life, the challenges and failures of mothers, thus, often remain concealed. In recent years, there has been an increased examination of the negative sides of motherhood in popular culture. For example, on Mother's Day 2018, Catherine Bennett (2018) invited readers to celebrate mothering failures rather than happy stories of unconditional love, devotion and gratitude.¹²⁴ In her article, she analyses three American movies from 2017 (namely, *I, Tonya*; *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing and Missouri*; and *Lady Bird*), in which mothers fail terribly. Another example, popularising the "non-photoshopped" and non-staged pictures of motherhood, is the photo project of Lithuanian born photographer Giedrė Gomes.¹²⁵ By exposing daily routines of women's lives with children, she focuses on care labour and the inevitable failures that mothers share. Such projects challenge the status quo by exposing the domestic realm, with all its material and emotional messiness, to the public eye. The Covid-19 pandemic during the years 2020–2022 has also created an unprecedented opportunity to enter private homes and lives, exposing the chaotic daily realities of family routines, revealing the

¹²⁴ *On Mother's Day, let's celebrate the pleasure of watching mums failing badly*. Retrieved June 11, 2018, from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/11/on-mothers-day-lets-celebrate-the-pleasure-of-mums-failing-badly>.

¹²⁵ *Mum shares honest photos to show what motherhood really looks like*. Retrieved June 11, 2018, from: <https://metro.co.uk/2018/05/17/mum-shares-honest-photos-show-motherhood-really-looks-like-7552909/>.

multiple burdens of working and care-taking mothers. Hence, the sphere of social reproduction has received more attention, while the need to address the invisibility and depreciation of care labour and redefine the concept of failure has become even more pressing.

Diverging from the norm

Pointing to capitalism as the root cause of the current global crisis, the authors of a *Notes for a Feminist Manifesto* argue that “the governments have slashed public funding, marketised public services and refamilialised the burden of care. In these circumstances, repeated admonitions to be a ‘good’ mother or a ‘good’ wife can turn into justifications for violence against those who fail to conform to gender roles” (Arruzza et al. 2018, p. 125). Being a *single* mother is a strong signifier of failure in Lithuanian society. Single mothers experience material deprivation and keep on striving for success and perfection, which often produces feelings of guilt and shame.

A mother of four, Vesta, who is now in her 60s and all her children are adults, still lives precariously, as she still constantly needs to support her adult children. An interview with her illustrates how governmentality works when women reinforce patriarchal standards on each other.

Vesta: I really do not support women who decide to have children on their own. Without a man, I mean, not in the family... I think it is a really egoistic approach. [...] I think it is a perversion.

Laura: I see... Then what about women who become single mothers not by their active choice, but let’s say, the fathers [of the children] abandon them?

Vesta: Well, her duty is to build a healthy environment for her children, so she must create this happy... [a long pause]

Laura: Do you mean that she needs to find another man as soon as possible?

Vesta: Yes, exactly! [pause] Of course, not everyone can do that.

Laura: So, then what?

Vesta: She needs to change her mindset. She needs to change herself, so she isn’t single anymore. Everything depends on here [points to her temple with her finger]. One can change if one wants. Of course, there are different situations, always some exceptions to the rule. But in general, children need to grow in a full [sic] happy family. (Vesta, summer 2017)

Vesta’s attitude toward single motherhood, family making and an individualised approach to personal enhancement echoes the dominant discourse in

Lithuania. Single mothers are measuring themselves against this predominant standard of success and a “full happy” family life. Although Vesta is a woman from another generation, another research participant, Liucija, who was in her late 30s at the time of this research, indirectly conveyed the same message:

I have a friend. Her husband left her with two children... Oh, so typical! And she is really nice and all that, she is drawing beautifully. She is an architect and an artist. And now she gave birth to another child, a third one, who knows from whom. But she is alone. So, I don't know... [pause]. I talked to her a while ago and I don't know... But this is so interesting, no? (Liucija, autumn 2016)

Liucija's statement is not directly judgemental, but it re-establishes the norm. She sees it as strange or, in her own words, “interesting”, that a single mother with two children dares to have another one on her own. Evidently, it is not a “normal” family and not a story of success. But this woman's failure is questioned by Liucija, as if she is trying to carefully scout and sense the boundaries – by asking without asking, what do I think of such a situation, how do I react, do I approve or disapprove. As Liucija herself had a fourth child on her own, while already being a single mother, this particular story that she relates to me translates into an examination of the limits and possibilities of transgression. Also, I believe that she was searching for solidarity, which I will return to later in this chapter.

Guilt and shame – the tools of governmentality

One sunny morning, I arrive at the kindergarten at the same time as Siga, a single mother of three. Whenever I see her in public, she is neatly dressed, in matching colours and tasteful, always different jewellery. She looks like a strong, self-confident woman, who is not only taking good care of her family but also good care of herself. After paying her some compliments, I get a surprising response: “Oh, this is just a façade!”

Her response signals to me that Siga wants to share more. We engage in a conversation right there in the parking lot. Disregarding other parents who come and go, we continue talking for over an hour. I tell her about my research and Siga is eager to share her experiences of an uneasy path to family and motherhood. Unexpectedly, this turns into our first interview, with several more to follow. Siga openly shares the story of her younger days, when she went to study abroad just to escape her parents' house. After getting pregnant, she quit her studies and came back to Lithuania to face the reality

of being a single mother. A few years later, Siga built a new, caring relationship with a new partner and had two more children. A few years ago, her husband passed away from a sudden illness, leaving her alone with three children. Siga explains:

Look, I live like a cheater [*svoločius*], because I don't work and live from state benefits. I could go to work, but where would I work? Even if I find a job, the salary would be a joke, and I would lose the time that I could spend with my children. [...] I love my children so much! When I had my first child, I was still carefree [*vėjavaiķē*]. With my second child I had really converted into true motherhood. It was a really powerful transformation. Like, full devotion. I used to sit at night sewing dolls, reading books about parenting, learning about vaccination, about everything. Deeply engaged. Maybe it happened because of Masha, the wife of my brother. I had a really beautiful relationship with her. So, I think, I just adopted her attitude, and of course, in God's grace, I learned a lot from her. She was sharing everything with me. And so, I became a devoted mother, I raised my children myself, never went to work, I was a stay-at-home-mom. I really love my children, and aside from the occasional shouting at them, our relationship is of high quality. My therapist says that it [shouting] happens because of a strong sense of guilt, and I'm trying to somehow redeem that guilt. I really like to play with them, to observe them, just watch them. But if any conflict arises, I absolutely lose my temper. I feel like I could just grab them and really shake them. (Siga, autumn 2017)

Two relevant themes come up in this excerpt in relation to failed motherhood: the feelings of guilt and the concept of work. I see these themes as deeply intertwined and reinforcing one another. Firstly, Siga expresses guilt for not being a “perfect mother” who loves unconditionally, takes care endlessly and controls her negative emotions when they arise. It is obvious from this narrative of Siga's, that she performs her maternal duties well: she spends time with her children, plays with them, gives them her undivided attention. But, in the words of Adrienne Rich, Siga like “every mother has known overwhelming, unacceptable anger at her children” (Rich, 1976/1995, p. 224). It is her duty to control her anger and always protect her children from it. She feels guilty and ashamed for failing to always do so.

Secondly, there is an evident reiteration by Siga of the idea that raising children and being a single mother is not considered “real work”. Hence, the separation of productive and reproductive work continues to neglect an indispensable amount of work done primarily by women. According to social reproduction theorists,

[t]he perversity becomes clear when we recall how vital and complex the work of people-making actually is. Not only does this activity create and sustain human life in the biological sense; it also creates and sustains our capacity to work [...]. And that means fashioning people with the ‘right’ attitudes, dispositions and values; abilities, competences and skills. (Arruzza, Bhattacharya & Fraser, 2018, p. 121)

There truly is no other labour of such magnitude and long-term responsibility. However, because of its depreciation, the mothers feel ashamed and guilty for not doing enough. Siga confides that she is living from state support and, thankfully, her mother helps by paying for her son’s kindergarten and for her daughter’s school. However, she feels uneasy, feeling the pressure to perform well at both motherhood and in the labour market.

Well, in these times every woman is required to make a career, because if you stay at home, you are either lazy, or stupid, or weak, or unemancipated, without any ambitions [...]. But yes, mothering is perhaps the hardest job in the world! It is the most difficult career you could think of because it is very unlikely that you will be able to succeed at it without making any major failures. But, of course, nobody sees that, nobody appreciates that. If you *only* raise your children, it means you are not doing anything. (Siga, autumn 2017)

Despite seeing this structural inadequacy, Siga still blames herself for failing to be a respectable citizen and a good enough mother (“I live like a cheater”). As she notes, the expectations are high, and women feel the requirement to do it all: to be a super-mother, to work for a salary, to engage in at least one life-long learning program, to exercise, to look good, to feel positive and energetic. There is a lot of guilt related not only to her failures at mothering but also to the societal expectations that she is unable to meet. The fact that Siga requires support from her mother and lives from the state benefits signifies her failure (*see* Silva, 1996).

In his historical analysis of debt, David Graeber (2011) argues that in the capitalist world the mathematical principles of the market sneak into our relationships and demand that we strive to attain an equilibrium, as if everything, from loans to the suffering of the mother, can and must be repaid (Graeber, 2011, p. 114). When everything, including human behaviour, gets reduced to a mathematical formula, it becomes merciless, especially to those who are, or are perceived as, indebted. The internalised sense of guilt (in Siga’s case, her perceived indebtedness to the state and to her mother) can be seen as a direct product of a system that valorises one kind of work and

disregards another. Thus, failing to embody the neoliberal role model of success of being a fully productive, autonomous, and positive woman generates feelings of guilt, shame and inferiority. According to Picard et al. (1997, p. 59),

[t]he recipient feels ashamed that they require support. This may be related to beliefs about the necessity of being autonomous and to difficulties in being in a dependent role with one's parents during adulthood. In a society that places a high value on separation and autonomy, it may be particularly difficult for an adult to accept that they require help from others. Receipt of support may perpetuate feelings of distress and inferiority.

For Siga, the uneasy sense of indebtedness is mixed with feelings of guilt and shame. However, there is no quick solution that would guarantee her autonomy and bring back her sense of pride. Siga reasons that after so many years of staying at home with children, she would probably only get a low-paying job, as a janitor or a caretaker. Moreover, if she started working, she would lose both the state benefits and the time she could dedicate to her children.

The current trends of re-traditionalisation in Europe create an additional tension around the institution of motherhood (Morell & Gradszkova, 2018; Kudaibergenova, 2017). Backed up by the Catholic Church and conservative political rhetoric, “traditional family values” reinforce ideological narratives about family and reproductive labour. In Poland and Hungary, impressive measures have been implemented to support nuclear families raising three or more children.¹²⁶ The tension is especially tangible in the post-Soviet context: my research participants repeatedly point to the failures of their own mothers, who worked both in the labour market and at home, were worn out and often absent, not able to fully devote themselves to their children. As LaFont had observed in 1998, “[y]oung women who watched their mothers struggle with the double burden are being encouraged to see their devotion to motherhood and family as a solution to the nation’s problems. [...] With unemployment levels reaching record highs and birth rates reaching record lows, successfully persuading women to stay at home and have children can superficially solve both problems simultaneously” (LaFont, 1998, p. 10).

¹²⁶ Hungary offers €30,000 to married couples who can produce three children. Retrieved August 1, 2019, from: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/07/29/hungary-offers-30-000-to-married-couples-who-can-produce-three-children>; *The Poland Model—Promoting ‘Family Values’ With Cash Handouts*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/10/poland-family-values-cash-handouts/599968/>.

The hegemonic image of the sacrificial mother keeps perpetuating the requirement for women to be, first and foremost, perfect at mothering – worthy of a medal as a “heroic mother” (as in the Soviet times). The following paragraph illustrates how the image of a “bad mother” contributes to maintaining patriarchal order and a recent push for re-traditionalisation in Eastern Europe.

Virginija: I know several such characters! For example, when a woman only gives birth to her children, then drops them onto the father and travels somewhere, does something else, advances her career, while children just grow up on their own.

Laura: Well, not on their own. You said, “with their father”.

Virginija: Mhm, with the father... [ironically]. Of course, he drops the children to the grandmother. So, these children are being tossed around all the time. But children need stability and security. [...] What I think is that we need a middle way. Feminism doesn't have it, so people are resistant to it. Or at least the way it is imagined here, that... [pause] or the way somebody portrays it... like... [pause] I'm not sure... As if you must drop everything now, you have to make a career, while your man¹²⁷ will sit with the children and something will be happening. But like this... [pause] It's not the way nature made it. [pause] For thousands of years it was different [pause]. A woman needs to be nice [*faina*], feminine. What happens if she turns into a man?

Laura: Do you think it is that simple?

Virginija: Anyway... [...] Women become manly, fierce, they don't need children anymore. (Virginija, summer 2017)

The common justification of the “natural order of things” shows how gender inequalities are concealed and maintained by the individualised and depoliticised approach to the practices of mothering. Femininity and the perceived exceptional ability of women to take care of others are seen by Virginija as natural and necessary qualities of a woman, even more so, of a mother.

The aspect of care is especially poignant in Virginija's remarks. When she ironically snaps, “yeah, right, with the father”, I could sense from her body language and her tone that she was critical of the father's inability or unwillingness to take care of his own children, which again places this responsibility

¹²⁷ A man or a husband, which is the same word in Lithuanian – “*vyras*”.

on the shoulders of another woman – the grandmother. In Virginija’s narrative, such a labour division is wrong, and yet the mother is faulty for not taking care of her children. The focus is placed on values and maternal failure, while feminism is seen as an enemy. Hence, this quote connects feminist scholarship with motherhood and points at a paradox: when women can afford to be more independent and share the load of reproductive labour with their partners, often, they are blamed for selfishness and lack of care.

This tension is tangible in many of the conversations with my research participants. The revival of conservative nuclear family values, which emphasize the woman’s role as the main caretaker and nurturer, clashes with the neoliberal push to be a self-sustaining subject. All my research participants have university degrees, and their investment in higher education is expected to translate into financial stability and to keeping the promise of a “good life” alive. However, having no access to decent and free childcare, Siga, like many other single mothers in my research, can’t perform well in both areas. In a system that considers childrearing a private matter and holds a mother fully responsible for its success (and thus guilty for its failures), the single mothers in my study feel like they have taken a dead-end street, which leads to an unavoidable sense of failure.

The standards of a “proper life” and “good mothering” are high, and the inevitable failure to meet those standards tends to lead to self-depreciation, guilt and shame. These feelings are born from the realisation that not everything goes according to the desired scenario. In the words of Adrienne Rich (1976/1995, p. 222), “under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong”. Being supported by the state, Siga feels guilty, even about small pleasures.

Truthfully, I constantly feel guilty. Firstly, because I don’t work and live from state benefits, although I try to take care of my children in the best way I can. And everything I do for myself only adds to that guilt, you know. I go to *Akropolis*¹²⁸ and buy a coffee latte, and I indulge myself. But then I think, God, how can I afford this? Why do I buy coffee at the coffee shop when I could drink it at home for free? I have similar feelings about going to a hairdresser, you know. I should be buying something for my children instead of using the money to pay for what’s unnecessary. I always feel so guilty. I am such a bad mother. (Siga, autumn 2017)

¹²⁸ A big shopping mall in the centre of Kaunas.

In her narrative, there's a lot of guilt about having such pleasures as an occasional cup of coffee or a visit to a hairdresser. Siga's discomfort is produced by her internalised feeling of "the failure to be in the right way" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 155). The failed assimilation to normality also seems to make Siga feel ashamed. In the words of Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 209), "[s]hame is the trace of disavowed class anxiety, the darker side of aspiration's optimism". While secretly indulging herself with little pleasures, Siga feels the inappropriateness of it. Her enjoyments feel incompatible with her status. Thus, the socially produced feelings of guilt and shame translate into accepting one's submission within a particular order – an order that women also reinforce on each other (as illustrated by the example of Virginija's as well as in the discussion on mother-daughter tension in Chapter 4).

In examining the stories of single mothers in my research, I agree with Adrienne Rich (1976/1995, p. 275) who argues that the real failure is the failure to "think of the power stolen from us and the power withheld from us in the name of the institution of motherhood". Putting all that blame on individual mothers instead of examining the institution of motherhood is an act of cruelty, according to Rose (2018, p. 63, 188).

Liucija recognises the heavy workload and gendered injustice with regard to motherhood, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

Only now I realised. I was thinking... [pause]. But wait, actually I *was* [emphasises] a devoted mother to my children and to my family! I did what I could, [I did] my best. I truly did everything with a lot of effort. Well, ok, I didn't go to beauty salons, and I didn't look like [a woman] from a magazine cover. But, come on, I had three small children, and I tried as hard as I could, as hard as I knew how. Now I think, my husband could also have taken a look at what's wrong, what could we change, instead of always blaming me for not doing something. It's very hard to think about this. Only this year [several years passed since their divorce] I relaxed a bit from that feeling of guilt. (Liucija, spring 2017)

This excerpt demonstrates how a rupture in Liucija's life produced some awareness about gender inequality and care labour. As the Spanish collective *Precarias a la Deriva* (2006) suggests in the manifesto called *A very careful strike*,

only if the caregivers, which all women are and everyone should be [que somos todas y que habríamos de ser todos] rediscover the fundamental role of the labor (remunerated or not) of care and of the social wealth it produces

and we withdraw from the invisibilization, hyperexploitation, infravalorization or social stigma of which care is the object, only then will we be prepared to extract from care its transformative force. Once brought into the light, the revolutionary potential of care could become the logic that governs our lives, replacing not only the security logic but also that other logic which underlies it: that of the imperatives of profit. (Precarias, 2006, p. 42)

As the collective proclaims, the capitalist, neoliberal political order cares more about production and profit than about social reproduction and actual people. What connects Liucija's realisation to the manifesto is the need for a better awareness about care labour, prioritisation of persons, attention to sustainable living, and perceiving failures as lessons and opportunities, rather than a pretext for social exclusion. To tackle such a biopolitical challenge, some tools are needed that would not only make care labour visible but would also interrupt the depreciation of caretakers. Their proposal for "the caring strike would be nothing other than the interruption of the order that is ineluctably produced in the moment in which we place the truth of care in the center and politicize it" (Precarias 2006, p. 42). Politicising care is a way to politicise failure and provide space for pride and agency.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I observed how sharing vulnerabilities, the uneasy feelings of guilt and shame, became an important part of a larger transformative process. As Sara Ahmed argues, "[t]o embrace or affirm the experience of shame [...] sounds very much like taking a pride in one's shame – a conversion of bad feeling into good feeling" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 175). In the next section I will examine how new feelings of pride and empowerment are produced by sharing and collectively embracing feelings of guilt, shame and failure. I will then suggest that a collectively experienced shame about being a failure can bring with it the potential to be transformative and to help us to understand the value of care and to see the everyday struggles as structural rather than personal.

Embracing failure

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3).

What comes after failure: questioning middle-class normality

As Halberstam insists, we must “recognize that social systems established around winning defined in terms of wealth, health, possessions, longevity, mobility, and access surely produce a community of people who must reside in failure in terms of their poverty, illness, ephemerality, stasis, and lack of access” (Halberstam, 2017, p. 194). Many of these “places” are familiar to the single mothers I interviewed. Liucija, Virginija, Gabija, Ūla, Aura, Rima and Siga – they all have embraced the inevitable, accepting the position of the *failed* one in a social system that is based on a neoliberal notion of success. However, when one drops out of the “game of success”, there are new questions and issues to address.

When Liucija, a mother of four, started sharing her sense of failure, the topic of normativity became part of our conversations. A couple of years after her divorce, Liucija engaged in a new romantic relationship and had another child. The father, however, was living abroad and would only visit occasionally. She kept coming back to the conclusion that such a life was not “normal”, and then repeatedly questioned, “But what is normal?”

In spring 2017, I call Liucija. She tells me that these past days had been difficult, even though nothing out of ordinary had happened. Liucija tells me she has no energy and is feeling exhausted [*iškvėšus*]. I suggest that I come over to her place the next day and that I would cook lunch for her and the girls. As I arrive, her youngest child, a two-year-old toddler, runs happily around the house, amusing herself with the cat. We occupy the kitchen, and I carefully observe Liucija: she stands with her back straight, chin up, the posture of confidence and dignity. Liucija shares: “The book I just read, by Simone Weil, helped me to realise something. To receive some inspiration... For example, such a thing as [short pause] *dignity*...” She doesn’t finish her line of thought, as her daughter interrupts. Liucija gently takes care of her child and then leaves the room to search for the book she just mentioned. She comes back in a couple of minutes bringing another book that is called *Atlas of the Poetic Continent: Pathways in Ecological Citizenship*, by Shelley Sacks and Wolfgang Zumdick. Laughingly, she tells me she could not find Weil’s book in all the mess, but here is another one she wants to show me. She hands me the book, and I curiously flip through the pages, interested in what kind of books Liucija is reading for inspiration. I open the introduction and read:

The maps for this poetic continent – unspoken, unwritten, discovered only in each moment of engaging with the world – are inspired by the constellations of the soul. Such constellations offer distilled understandings on the path to a

new society: a viable future of humane and ecological citizens – if we become aware of our nature as creative ‘freedom-beings’ and of the responsibility that is integral to this freedom. [...] [W]e have realized that all our social sculpture explorations relate to the constellations of the poetic continent in as much as they offer insights for *coming to our senses*. (Sacks & Zumdick, 2013, p. 3)¹²⁹

After I read this passage out loud, Liucija tells me that she immediately felt connected to this message. Seeing oneself as a creative, free being, who is able to re-connect to one’s senses, resonates with Liucija’s deeply felt wish to resist societal norms. Then, she starts reflecting upon ruptures as life lessons.

Liucija: This is where I get my inspiration from [points at the book]. I need it in order to exit those programs.

Laura: To exit *those* programs?

Liucija: Well yeah... all that programming. [To escape] from the idea that family is... Well, what is family? Really, what *is* family? And all that judgement and everything... and well... [pause] How to live with the fact that all the environment is always judging you?

Laura: What is this environment?

Liucija: Everyone, absolutely everyone. Family, friends ... with a few exceptions, everyone. Even if some people don’t say it, they still think it and silently judge. Like for example now, [my daughter] came about. I already had three children and now [she] comes. From where did she appear? There’s no one to take care of her, no one to take responsibility for her... As a single mother I got one more child. And then, well... [pause] immediately all this... you know... (Liucija, spring 2017)

She doesn’t finish the sentence, assuming that the stigmatisation she is experiencing is obvious without any additional explanation. To Liucija, her shrinking social circle signifies that her decision to give birth to another child, outside of marriage, while already being a single mother, resulted in her social status dropping down yet another level. Moreover, her financial situation also means the loss of middle-class normality, which Liucija describes as a painful, yet eye-opening experience.

Normally, you live a normal life, because... this is a *normal life*. You grow up, you study, get a profession, marry, have some children, acquire housing, work and travel. This is what I consider a normal life. So... [pause], this is the life I

¹²⁹ All italics are in the original.

lived. I had everything. Everything was in order. [...] I strived for such a life, because this was the life I was expected to live by my parents, by the society, and, generally, by everyone. [...] Then, suddenly, we wake up and find ourselves reproducing the same norms and judgements that we despise. (Liucija, spring 2017)

Liucija admits, that fitting in has been important for the greater part of her life. She recognises these normative phantasies that, according to Berlant (2011), wire our affective circulations and keep us aiming for the image of a good, rich, and “normal” life – the middle-class life with all that it entails. Liucija, a trained sociologist, tries to examine her previous lifestyle – her conforming to the societal expectations in terms of gender, age, family status, wealth, etc. Although for a long time Liucija was having a “good life” according to these norms, she has increasingly felt the need to challenge imposed standards and to question the meaning behind them. Her third child was born at home with the help of a doula and a midwife. In her house, there are no antibiotics, antipyretics or preventive medicines. However, only after going through her divorce and becoming a single mother, did Liucija start reflecting on how crucial it had been to stick to the normality, maintain a conventional lifestyle and demonstrate success.

Finally, I understood how important it is to be *normal* [emphasises]. Even my closest friends can't stop evaluating and judging me, let alone my acquaintances. Too many children! Why doesn't she work? Why doesn't she leave her toddler in the kindergarten? Why doesn't she use medicine? How can she live with that man whom she only sees once per month? How can she live in such a mess? Why doesn't she do this or that? You have no idea how judgmental people are. You can't imagine how many friends I lost after the divorce. It's like... [pauses] all the friends of our family backed off. No contact remained. And even those [female] friends who are still in touch with me, I can sense from their tone... I can sense how they evaluate, as if I am some kind of exotic, a confused woman ['nesusipratèle']. (Liucija, autumn 2017)

In this conversation, Liucija shares her sorrow about her losses. She is disappointed that people prefer her to be “normal” and to live “a normal life” instead of caring about her actual wellbeing. According to Rose (2018, p. 56), the mother is often pressed into submissiveness, while her “[c]lass, housing, level of nutrition, the presence or absence and behaviour of the father or partner are all wiped out of the picture. She has been placed in a social vacuum, severed, even before her baby is born, from the mundane, basic realities and pressures of a lived life.” As I have shown in the previous

chapters, single mothers often talk about their day-to-day realities as a “social vacuum”, where they feel invisible and unappreciated as people. As Soheyla Yazdanpanah (2008, p. 278) has also demonstrated in her research on single mothers in Sweden, women need to maintain their position as respectable citizens not only by handling the household economy, but also by sustaining their family’s worthiness and respect, making the right choices and prioritising. According to Liucija, in failing to comply with the rules of capitalism, in failing to maintain a certain level of wealth and making “illogical” choices outside the norm, one faces the risk of losing one’s status and being placed outside of society altogether.

You know, my brother once told me: if you don’t have big money, you become nothing, you drop out of the game. If you can’t spend your days sitting in a café sipping coffee, if you can’t afford this or that, you are erased from the society. Especially, from that upper layer of the society, we are all striving to get to. And, of course, [the aim is] to stay there. You know, after he said that, I started noticing. Precisely! Friends who are rich and continue to run in that rat race, making loads of money and sipping coffees in cafés, are not my friends any longer. And it’s not me who pushed them away. Somehow, I noticed that, indeed, I had dropped out of the game. Out of *that* game. Which, by the way, doesn’t interest me anymore. (Liucija, autumn 2017)

Liucija feels doubly stigmatised: being unable to meet the middle-class standards not only makes her feel like a failure at motherhood but also strips her of her class identity. Liucija feels as a drop-out from the “game”. According to Skeggs (1997/2002, p. 7), “[c]lass informs not only the production of [...] women’s subjectivity but also how it is central to us all, even if we do not feel impeded by it or choose not to recognize it, or to avoid it through disidentifications and dissimulations”. Downward mobility, which Liucija started experiencing after becoming a single mother, manifests not only in terms of material wellbeing but also by disintegrating social networks.

However, Liucija hints at what she has gained through this process: a new understanding. She expresses anger about narrow-mindedness, unequal treatment and stigmatisation. Referring to her earlier efforts to meet societal expectations, she critically examines her previous choices. By stating that this kind of life doesn’t interest her any longer, Liucija demonstrates her critical standpoint. She embraces failure and starts examining ideals that link one’s sense of self and self-worth to the ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family, material wealth and status. According to Liucija, before, she never would have dared to live a different life, other than what was expected from her. The

rupture, however, became an opportunity to review her outlook and position. According to Halberstam,

failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners, and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3)

The new openings provided by embracing one's failures, in Halberstam's terms, can be developed into counterhegemonic strategies. Sara Ahmed (2017) sees this process as redirecting one's path, queering away from what's "normal" or what's expected from us. She argues that when we hit the wall – when we are "thrown against the wall of history" – we can be shattered, we can break, can lose ourselves and damage the relationships that matter. And "that is one of the hardest things about coming up against walls: it can threaten some of our most fragile and precious, our best and our warmest connections" (Ahmed 2017, p. 172). However, this can be turned into an opening, an opportunity for revising some of that normative baggage carried by the women in my study who are privileged by their education, social status, white skin and ability, but multiply underprivileged by their position of single motherhood. Liucija describes her experiences like hitting a wall. At the same time, she reflects on her "multiple failures" seeing them as an opportunity for retrospection and new visions.

When you drop out of this normality, you must reconsider everything, reconsider all your life in order to continue living. However, despite this stumble, I noticed that everyone wants you to make it back to normal [life] as soon as possible. To how it was. That there would appear a man who would take responsibility and everything would get back to a normal family life, just as before. However, I realised that this is precisely my chance to find what I truly want, to reject that standard, to forget how it is *supposed* [emphasises] to be. It is possible to live differently, right? Absolutely differently. (Liucija, spring 2017)

This example clarifies how the rupture leads Liucija to a counter-hegemonic way of thinking, which opens new possibilities. As Liucija's friends gasped

with surprise and astonishment about her seemingly irrational choices (e.g., giving birth to another child as a single mother), her close family, especially her mother and brother, expressed judgement and disdain. Despite the backlash, Liucija realised she didn't want to return to "another normality". She would rather use this rupture point for further exploration of herself and the alternative ways of caring. "I believe there are different, alternative ways of being in a relationship, of having intimacy and some other kind of family", Liucija states with full confidence (spring 2017).

Even though Liucija refers to her divorce in terms of failure, the new situation it brought forth enabled her to start rediscovering her personal needs and autonomy. Despite increased material hardship, Liucija explains that she found her situation to be empowering and liberating. She started sharing her sense of failure with other women, socialising and going to events (as described in Chapter 5). Upon realising that former friends became distant after the divorce, she started meeting new people and joined a community of women (doulas). By examining her failure, Liucija arrived at the conclusion that dropping out of the game, might just be the better option, as the pressure to match patriarchal ideals had never been a safe bet (Halberstam, 2011, p. 4).

The challenges that Liucija has faced since she "dropped out of the game" were simply unknown to her in her former life, when she was staying in line and in order, being married to a socially and economically well-established white middle class man. Contrary to women who are unprivileged by different variables (like class, race, disability, sexual orientation, etc.), Liucija had not previously experienced social exclusion or stigmatisation. In her own words, this new experience provided her "with new eyes for seeing glaring inequalities" (Liucija, autumn 2017). Loosing part of her privilege, Liucija finds herself questioning societal norms, gender roles, class inequalities, care labour, the institution of marriage and rules of family-making. Hence, this case is illustrative in terms of personal transformations, something that Gloria Anzaldúa (1976/1995) defines as moving from a position of safe ignorance to a painful shift in perception and knowing:

[i]t is anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one's defences and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception. This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul). [...] We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is

taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999, p. 39)

Due to economic hardship and poor support, the women in my research have experienced the loss of their habitual grounding. According to Ahmed (2006, p. 170), “disorientation happens when the ground no longer supports an action. We lose ground, we lose our sense of how we stand; we might even lose standing.” However, the new situation is an opportunity for “re-orientation” (Ahmed, 2006). As Liucija’s example illustrates, queering the path, enacted by the failure, then becomes a dignified act of transgression, leading to deeper reflections about the structural inequalities that are visible on the bodies and in the lives of those who do not fit.

Challenging maternal devotion and sacrifice

Liucija’s case illuminates the multi-layered tensions that are connected to the ideal of the nuclear family and the internalised narrative of failure. Single mothers, who represent an admonition to the norm (Rose, 2018, p. 28), are frequent characters in this narrative. The previously discussed lack of success in living a “normal” life of wealth and status adds another layer to the already existing prejudices about single mothers. Reconsidering her life, Liucija talks about her feelings of weariness and habitual suffering, which Lauren Berlant (2011, p. 28) calls the “technologies of patience”. The cruel optimism, that Berlant conceptualises, is maintained by such patience, resilience and the wearing out of the multi-layered personality while waiting for a *better later*. According to Jacqueline Rose (2018, p. 28), the historically normalised “idea that a mother should exist for her child and nothing else” creates additional tensions and another opportunity to fail at “perfect motherhood”. A single mother has limited possibilities for a *better now*, but her failure can become transformative and help to challenge the single mother’s status quo.

“Negative heroism” is a term used by Gabija, as she talks about the ways in which women inhabit the role of the omnipotent mother, who is supposed to do everything on her own, neglecting her own needs. Although appalled by this image, Gabija reluctantly admits that she is struggling to exit this culturally appropriate matrix of motherly heroism.

Karolina, a professional woman in her 30s, the daughter of Vesta (who was introduced earlier in this chapter), expressed a similar aversion to the ubiquitous ideal of motherly devotion. For her, one of the ways to stay sane as a (single) mother is to challenge that norm and practice “healthy egoism”. Raising her 6 years old child, she tries to remember her own needs.

I don't want to know, and I don't want to see how my mother is struggling, how she sacrifices her life for us. I don't want to be indebted to her for that. I just want to love her, simply love. This is why I swore to myself that I will never sacrifice my life for my children, I will never ever tear myself apart in the name of the better life they could have. I will rather simply live my own life. You need to have a certain amount of egoism to be able to afford to think about yourself, because otherwise it will be a total disaster. If I won't be happy, my child will be unhappy too. (Karolina, spring 2017)

While the promise of happiness might be somewhat misleading, the attention to self-care and the rejection of motherly sacrifice is of utmost importance. Continuing her argument, Karolina suggests: "Ok, you failed, that's fine, your partnership is over, but it doesn't mean that you have to flagellate yourself for the rest of your life" (Karolina, spring 2017). For Karolina, replacing the sense of sacrifice with "healthy egoism" is a way to provide self-care and well-being for both the mother and the child.

A different temporality is invoked here than with the image of the "Soviet mother", which emerged in the narratives of my research participants as a symbol of self-sacrifice. Karolina states that women of her generation arguably have much more choice, freedom, mobility and comfort in their daily lives than their mothers ever had. Considering the current range of domestic appliances, daily realities look very different. Karolina argues that the Soviet mothers have failed mostly by disregarding their own needs. According to her, "they would have been much better off, their lives would have been much happier, if they didn't shred themselves to pieces [nesiplėšytų] for our sake" (Karolina, spring 2017). Although this statement reinvokes the responsabilisation of individual mothers, disregarding the structural inadequacies of those prior times, for Karolina, it works as a strategy of survival and the expression of her own agency.

An illustrative example of working-class families in the U.S. in the 1970s comes from the ethnographic study of everyday family life by Lillian Rubin. As retold by Lauren Berlant in her book on cruel optimism, the children from Rubin's study *Worlds of Pain* (1977) "watch their parents' worlds shrink inwardly to the scale of getting through the day. The children grow up feeling guilty about taking up space, seeing their parents doing their best, but being powerless as well" (Berlant, 2011, p. 186). Having experienced a similar sacrificial parenting in her own childhood in Soviet Lithuania, Karolina actively takes the opposite stance. She had observed the suffocating life of her mother (single mother of four) and became determined to preserve herself as an autonomous human being, as a woman, not only as a devoted mother.

I have said very clearly to myself that with my child I won't repeat my mother's mistakes. I need to live my life. Of course, [my child] is part of my life, but he cannot be all my life. [...] A game, for example [pause]. I won't play with him if it's not interesting to me. And I don't want to pretend that it is interesting. So, it's like... [...] I don't want to pretend and lie to him that I'm dying to play these children's games. Instead, I try and search for other points of connection in our relationship. Like, other common activities that would be interesting for both of us, you know. Just like that. I'm an egoistic mother. (Karolina, spring 2017)

According to Karolina, this attitude helps her maintain a sense of independence. Her major strength, Karolina points out, is her "healthy egoism" and "selfishness", which serves to remind the child that she is there to help him grow up and develop, but not to sacrifice her own life.

The issue of reproductive labour lies between the lines. Karolina describes her failure to perform the role of a "perfect mother" not *in spite* of her attempt to meet those high standards and societal demands but *because* of her attempt to challenge and redefine them. Rose's (2018) intervention into Simon de Beauvoir's most famous thesis, that one is not born, but becomes a woman, is relevant here. Rose (2018, p. 133) suggests that "[u]nder the right political conditions, you can un-become her, too, you can shed the requisite role and make yourself". Then, one can un-become a single mother by questioning and redefining both words: "single" and "mother". In the society where the term "single" implies "failed", and the term "mother" means unconditional love, care and sacrifice, there is a pressing need for a more nuanced definition that comes from a more critical perspective.

Karolina's case is an illuminating example of an act of resistance to the role that a mother is expected to perform. Instead of sacrifice as redemption for failure, she argues for an approach that serves her needs and is closer to the concept of well-being rather than resilience. She says, "I remember how I wanted to have a *mother* [emphasises] instead of things and comfortable living [*pilnas aprūpinimas*]. [...] If I am happy – my child will be happy, too" (Karolina, spring 2017). For Karolina, "to have a mother" doesn't necessarily mean to spend more time together. On the contrary, her statement implies every mother's reconnection to herself and reclaiming her own personality, her own meaningful life.

The refusal to embrace sacrifice is one aspect of care for Karolina. She ties the maternal sacrifice to the concept of debt, which ultimately binds everyone to paying this debt off. Karolina sees this debt as unpayable: "I don't want to feel indebted to my mother for everything she has done for us and for how

much she sacrificed. Essentially, I did not need her sacrifice. Children will never see it that way and won't appreciate that sacrifice anyway" (Karolina, spring 2017). The very premise that the debt to our mothers can be repaid is false. In Karolina's view, by refusing to reproduce the model of sacrificial motherhood, she fails at "perfect mothering", but she liberates herself as a person and releases her child from this everlasting indebtedness. In her counternarrative, Karolina reconfigures her failure into the search for personal space, autonomy and self-care.

Beyond individuality: collective responses to failure and help

According to Ann Cvetkovich (2012), it is rather shameful to share failures, so we often keep silent. Once the brokenness becomes too big to hide, sharing makes this brokenness public. Cvetkovich theorises depression as a public feeling. Even if only a couple of single mothers in my research explicitly talked about depression, the way the single mothers narrated their feelings of failure and vulnerability resembles Cvetkovich's analysis of societal depression. The shame and privacy around such feelings is what makes it difficult to endure. According to Liucija,

it's so difficult to escape this stronghold. Because it's so deeply entrenched in me. This understanding that I must endure. Endure *on my own* [emphases]. Because we always lived like this, enclosed within our own families. There are friends and their families, but there is a complete separation [between separate families]. And I used to live like that myself! [...] Now I receive exactly what I deserve, like an image in the mirror of how I used to live. You see... [...] These are the lessons in my life I must learn from. (Liucija, autumn 2017)

Liucija's narrative exemplifies a powerful image of endurance, enclosure within the nuclear family and general resistance to exposing one's vulnerabilities. Asking for help strips one of the façade and, arguably, of respect (see Skeggs, 1997/2002). Like depression, failure, too, "can be everywhere as part of the insidious effects of a culture that says people should be sovereign agents but keeps weighing them down with too much (or too little) to do. This is especially true for middle-class subjects, as well as for those living within the aspirational orbit of middle-class life" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 158). For a single mother, asking for help equals admitting her own personal failure. And only by sharing their failures with others, can an embodied transformation and a shift in perspective take place, as the following excerpt illustrates.

But really, do we have to always be these independent, self-sustaining women who do everything on our own?! I was thinking, I need to learn to ask for help if I need it. Even though this is one of the most difficult things to do for someone who is used to being all strong and composed. [...] Now I finally realised: why do I have to do this alone? Why? I live among people, no? So why not to ask for help in the moments of weakness or when it's needed? (Liucija, winter 2018)

The acceptance of her weakness provides Liucija with a broader understanding of her position. Embracing one's "weakness" and the impossibility of always being self-sufficient and positive signifies acceptance of one's vulnerabilities, which makes it easier to share them with others. The image of a strong independent woman and a "perfect mother", for Liucija, is replaced by the insight that her own wellbeing must come first. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe Liucija's transformation. I witnessed how she opened up and started sharing her situation with other mothers in her close circles. In return, they started sharing theirs, too. Out of failure, a new – *resistant* – subjectivity was born, outside of the eyes of the public, strengthening the inner circles. According to Maria Lugones (2010, p. 746), such intimate interlinking from the position of the oppressed can be seen as "infra-politics", the politics of resistance that highlights "the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning and each other against the constitution of meaning and social organization by power". It is a turn inward, away from the politics of the public, but towards subtle forms of everyday resistance, both via mutual care for each other and refusal to care.

In early spring 2018, Liucija was making a "schedule" for her friends and extended family members who would take shifts in helping her with childcare and domestic duties. Being capable of admitting without shame that she has difficulties handling the housework alone, Liucija had set a new example of care and communality. According to her, being open to talking about shortcomings in front of others, enabled her to ask for help.

Another single mother, Gabija, was similarly critical of the current individualist motherhood ideology. In our conversation about solidarity and a possible network of mutual support, Gabija wondered about the level of disconnectedness and alienation that she had experienced.

That saying, 'we are on our own', was never sticking with me. Because it's not like that in the forest. It's not like that in the bottom of the ocean. It's only in the head. And I wonder why. (Gabija, autumn 2017)

In terms used by Lauren Berlant (2011), this is how normative phantasies and cruel optimism operate, producing an illusion of a good life as an individualistic project. These mechanisms and “circuits of optimism and disappointment” are also reinforced by conditions of living that force precarious subjects to focus on short term solutions, rather than making long-term alliances (Berlant, 2011, p. 27). While precarious conditions, arguably, can inspire creativity and inventiveness regarding short-term solutions, they can also lead to oblivion and limit imagination when it comes to imagining an alternative reality. According to Berlant (2011), neoliberalism demands repetition of old, already established forms and prevents us from imagining something different, something beyond disconnection, beyond reality with pre-imagined rules.

According to Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013), there is indeed a limit to self-sufficiency, and it’s at this threshold of autonomy that we can see ourselves as relational and interdependent beings. Thus, we are always-already dispossessed of ourselves, bound together through a constitutive self-displacement. In this case, the task is to recognise this displacement and to think about the kind of community that would be “centered on considering the vulnerability of others and recuperating collective responsibility for the lives of one another” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 136).

Accepting one’s vulnerability and failure has led several single mothers to recognise interdependency. Although solidarity tends to develop primarily among those who we love and care for, I have observed how solidarity was formed between strangers who find themselves in similar situations.¹³⁰ By embracing failure after a rupture, single mothers in my research have often developed a deeper sense of solidarity to other (single) mothers, as they felt inspired to create a network of care, to nurture a sense of collectivity and to support and help each other in ways previously alien to them.

Saulė, a single mother of two, whom I met in one of the *Cycle* events, shared her vision to create a platform for mothers to communicate, exchange information and help each other. After some time, we met in the city for lunch. Saulė shared some personal stories of loneliness and lack of support. After her divorce, she moved to Kaunas where she felt out of place, as she had no one to assist her with childcare. “If something were to happen to me, I don’t have anyone to count on to even pick up my children from the kindergarten!” (Saulė, spring 2017). Both her parents were deceased, and she

¹³⁰ According to Graeber (2011, p. 100), “[o]ne always behaves in a spirit of solidarity more with some people than others, and certain institutions are specifically based on principles of solidarity and mutual aid”.

didn't have friends yet, since they only moved to Kaunas recently. She didn't talk from a position of victimhood, but from a place of self-care and transformative power. Her shared "personal" problem became a political one by way of sharing. She saw her failure as an opportunity to grow and connect with others.

Our conversation at lunch crystallised into the idea of creating a closed Facebook group for single mothers in Kaunas. That same day, Saulė launched this group, inviting single mothers from throughout Kaunas to join. It was her vision to build a safe space for expressing solidarity, exchanging information and providing each other with emotional support. According to Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 155), the shared experience of feeling out of place, not entitled, unsure, uncomfortable, and scared is already a sign of potential linkages. It is around such experiences that bodies gather, get together and act, creating potentiality for new proximities (ibid).

New proximities and links can arrive in different shapes. For Liucija, it became clear that approaching someone in a similar situation could build bridges and provide solidarity.

You know, now I thought, what makes you grow as a person is... [pause]. Maybe [to change my] thinking. How can *I* help someone? Perhaps I can find a single mother who has not four, but eight children and offer *her* my help? Even if I can only provide some kind of comfort or inspiration. To say, look, you are not alone, we are together in this, even that could be enough. (Liucija, winter 2018)

This realisation felt like an epiphany to Liucija. Despite her own workload, Liucija thought about making connections with those in a similar situation. For her, connecting to other women and establishing a bond of mutual support beyond family ties, seemed like a completely new approach. In the words of Athena Athanasiou (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 136), "[p]erhaps what is at stake here is a shift from the (wounded) narcissism of autonomous and sovereign self-identity, which lies at the heart of the individualistic ontology of modernity, to an ethics and politics of post-identity subjectivities, which are consigned and exposed to the exposure, abandonment, precarity, and vulnerability of others". To attend to the situation of others means to interrogate existing schemes of normativity, be they economic, national, gender or sexual (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 153).

As the artist and community organiser Autumn Brown (2016, p. 105) suggests,

[s]carcity thinking says that we cannot expect others to provide what we need, and that creating systems to ensure that basic needs are met are pointless exercises in altruism. Abundance thinking says that together, we have enough of what we need, that there is enough for all of us if we recognize our essential interdependence. Abundance thinking requires that we share our struggles and our rewards. Abundance thinking trusts that if we develop relationships based on sharing our struggles AND our resources, we do in fact have enough of everything – love, food, energy, and power.

Feeling failed, disempowered and enraged, several of the single mothers in my research gathered strength by recognising interdependence and relating to the situations of other single mothers. The women continue to meet, in playgrounds, in living rooms, at the kitchen tables, to build a sense of interconnectedness by sharing how they all have failed.

Sharing failures at the kitchen table: affective connections

Generations of women have gathered around kitchen tables to elevate their *personal* to the *political*. As Jacqueline Rose (2018, p. 174) suggests, “one of the complaints and limitations of the modern mother in the West today is that she so often finds herself adrift from the wider world, from public, political life”. For many single mothers in my research their reality has been narrowed down to attempting to solve daily life matters. Rather symbolically, many of the meetings and conversations during my fieldwork took place in domestic settings. The kitchen, however, has also served as the safe space for shared vulnerabilities and for what can be seen as subtle engagements in micro politics.

As anthropologist Sarah Pink has noted in her conceptualising of daily domestic objects through gender (2004) and situating everyday life through mundane activities (2012), the kitchen plays an exclusive role for political potential. In Pink’s words, “while domestic practices can be engaged to sustain conventional moralities, values and ways of being, they are also frequently sites for developing innovations that depart from what domestic practitioners understand as traditional ways of doing, being and experiencing” (Pink, 2012, p. 50). She also demonstrates through various examples “how at the intersection between practices of everyday life, their performances by different practitioners and other components of unique configurations may emerge normativity, innovation, change and thought-out activism, and that these are not necessarily separate from each other” (ibid, p.50). It is important to note, how within the same setting, an interplay between norm-

ativity and counter-hegemonic ideas – such as stagnation and change, victimhood and pride – can coexist. The process of sharing is therefore valuable in and of itself.

Sara Ahmed (2006) reminds us of the feminist publishing company *Kitchen Table Press*. As Ahmed suggests, “[w]e could say that the kitchen table provides the kind of surface on which women tend to work. To use the table that supports domestic work to do political work (including the work that makes explicit the politics of domestic work) is a reorientation device” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 61). She beautifully elaborates how the kitchen table indeed records the intimacy of the relationships – for instance, the one of mothers and daughters. Highly charged, these intimacies are neither put aside or below the table, they are faced and met up front, on the table (Ahmed, 2006, p. 62). The kitchen table, at which many of my talks with single mothers took place, gained symbolic significance in my research. A sense of activity, sociality and sensoriality, as noted by Pink (2009), was often present in our conversations. As Ahmed elucidates the thick layers of meaning,

[t]he dining table is a table around which a ‘we’ gathers. Such tables function quite differently from the writing table: not only because they support a different kind of action, but also because they point toward collective gatherings; that is a table around which bodies gather, cohering as a group through the ‘mediation’ of its surface, sharing the food and drink that is ‘on’ the table. [...] What passes on the table establishes lines of connection between those that gather (Ahmed, 2006, p. 80).

Mothers who gather around a table can speak out about their feelings, share their sorrows, anger and shame. They can shout out for help as well as to offer some to others. But also, they can question whether the failures they blame themselves for are really “their own”. “Is this my own fault?” (Liucija) “How can I stop feeling guilty?” (Siga) “Is this an end or a new beginning?” (Gabija)

Sitting at the kitchen table in Vesta’s home in early September 2017, we drink herbal tea. Her daughter Karolina is currently visiting, and I feel lucky to meet women of two generations in one place. Both women are my research participants, however, they take different standpoints on almost any topic we discuss.¹³¹

Karolina shares some personal stories. Being unable to maintain a good relationship, Karolina has decided to separate from her partner. She retro-

¹³¹ It was Karolina’s suggestion to conduct an interview with her mother Vesta, too. Her suggestions were based on generational differences and her mother’s supposed willingness to share her stories.

spectively examines her life and justifies her decision by bringing up the child's perspective: "It would have been better for everyone, if my parents had divorced earlier" (Karolina, autumn 2017). A lot of "negative affects" come to the surface, as the mother and daughter disagree about making the right choice regarding the family. They also disagree about where to locate the "real" failure: staying within the nuclear family "for the sake of children" or "selfishly breaking free" and "stripping the children of a normal family". Violently stirring the honey in her tea, Karolina is also stirring a heated discussion with her mother. However, both women try to find a common ground for understanding how fundamentally different choices can be equally legitimate. The kitchen becomes a place to process feelings, such as shame, regret, resentment, anger, in a way that resembles a therapy session (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 110). In addition, these kitchen conversations become a potentially political act of acknowledging different temporalities and ideologies, redirecting the feelings of guilt and shame from personal responsibility to structural inadequacies and systemic gendered inequalities. Ann Cvetkovich argues that,

[r]ather than seeing negative feelings of failure, mourning, despair, and shame as getting in the way of politics or needing to be converted to something more active in order to become politics, such work attends to felt experience as not only already political but as transforming our understandings of what counts as political. (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 110)

By allowing such conversations into the space around the kitchen table, it can bring forth transformative power to women who turn their personal experiences into collective stories. During my fieldwork, it became apparent how much power women gained by connecting through "negative" affects and feelings. Their narratives of failure slowly became crystallised into a low-key strategy to form shared feelings and a sense of collectivity, providing a space for political awareness. Thus, the central point of this chapter is the transformative power embedded in reconceptualising failure, which I have read as expressions of pride and agency.

Talking about her sense of failure, Rima was passionately addressing an imaginary audience, the society at large, with all its judgements and expectations:

I don't need your damned support or approval; I can recognise my strength in my weaknesses. And I can handle this. I'm not that little girl any longer, who had to be only pitied and comforted. Now, I am who I am. With all my

flaws and failures. And finally, I have confidence in myself. (Rima, autumn 2017)

According to Rima, it took a while for her to integrate those “flaws and failures”. However, she recognised this process as one of her most important jobs after becoming a single mother. For Liucija, it was a “radical” move to stop being a “heroic mother” and to instead ask for help. Admitting her failure to take care of herself while taking care of others, expanded the space of critical reflexivity:

Enough is enough. I lost all the power, and I stop here. I thought, so radical! And then I see that when I stop – nothing collapses – children are still taken care of. Wow! I can’t believe that everything that I had to do alone is now done by four people that are needed to replace me... [exclaims with genuine amazement]. But everything is taken care of, maybe not perfectly, but managed [smiles]. My dear God, why didn’t I stop earlier? (Liucija, spring 2018)

In this paragraph, Liucija expresses her realisation that by embracing her failure and vulnerability, she was able to turn her own personal circumstances into a collective, public matter. People stepped in with solidarity and support, when she simply “stopped”. With deep disappointment, Liucija reflects on the fact that by being spatially and socially isolated, single mothers often lack the awareness that they are not alone, and that they can and must ask for help. Admitting failures and embracing the outcomes seems like a strong political position, which can produce a new critical reflexivity about reproductive labour and the distribution of responsibilities. Liucija wished she had realised earlier that sharing her failures with the entire “village” allows for her to escape the social vacuum many single mothers continue to live in.

Concluding remarks: failure as a political narrative device to address the crisis of care

This chapter has delved into the narratives of mothers who have faced failure and examined how embracing and acknowledging failure can lead to empowerment. While previous chapters emphasised the resilience and positive aspects of close care networks, here I explored stories and emotions related to failure and analysed the transformative potential of de-individualising such experiences. The ethnographic examples show that sharing vulner-

abilities can foster a re-evaluation of mothering practices, shifting the focus from personal shortcomings to collective and political dimensions. By navigating the interplay between failure, care and empowerment, I have argued that recognising failure as a collective and structural issue allows single mothers to cope with their situations more effectively. Consequently, this chapter contributes to the feminist discourse on social reproduction by redefining failure as a collective process of destigmatising single mothers. Additionally, it demonstrates how embracing and collectively acknowledging maternal failure can serve as a transformative and politicising force, enriching feminist knowledge production and fostering solidarity. Otherwise, “without support for experimenting with group process, including disappointments with their outcomes and allowance for failure, retreat into familistic bonds may appear to be the only enclave of social influence in a depersonalized world” (Brenner & Haaken, 2000, p. 345).

This chapter shows that the politicisation of single mothers’ failures occurs when traditional notions of the normative family are shattered, igniting a process of exploration beyond the societal expectations of a “perfect mother” and an “ideal, normal family”. Embracing failure allows single mothers to transform moments of rupture into opportunities to recognise their struggles as a political, public matter (Cvetkovich, 2012). Participants such as Liucija, Gabija and Rima shared how accepting their sense of failure empowered them to occupy new spaces where pride and dignity replace guilt, and where self-worth and self-confidence replace shame, and collective responses and resistance arise in place of individualism and responsabilisation. The failed normative phantasies and cruel optimism of “happily ever after” allow for the formation of new connections and alliances. In turn, these connections allow one to “contest social relations as given and [...] access traditions of political action that [...] offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present. These histories also identify potent avenues of failure, failures that we might build upon to counter the logics of success that have emerged from the triumphs of global capitalism” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 19). Thus, failure serves not as an escape, but as a new route to connection, a new narrative that aids in coping with single mothers’ precarity.

INTERLUDE: THE GRAMMARS OF SINGLENESSE AND SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

Through prolonged engagement in ethnographic research, a safe space emerged, enabling single mothers to question concepts relevant to my study. Particularly noteworthy was the persistent, though unforeseen, attention directed towards a concept that lies at the very heart of my project: that of single motherhood. The women conveyed a particular sense of concern, discomfort and perceived injustice associated with this term. I interpreted these sentiments as an invitation on their behalf to address the matter and to pose the following question: What are the broader implications of this label on the subjectivities of single mothers?

As Chapter 3 of this dissertation illustrates, single mothers in Lithuania continue to grapple with social exclusion, while the label “single mother” still carries negative connotation and stigma, damaging women’s self-worth. My inquiry unveiled how subtle forms of stigmatisation manifest in daily life scenarios and micro-level interactions, particularly within close relationships. The lived experiences of single mothers within my research unequivocally confirm that their singleness contributes to the construction of deviance and stigmatisation, not only materially but also conceptually. Their partnership status remains a defining normative criterion, reinforcing the norm of a married woman within the framework of capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017a). On the other hand, as suggested by Chow Yiu Fai (2019), there is a double meaning linked to a woman’s singleness: while one is rooted in the constructs of capitalism and patriarchy, the other points toward singleness as an emancipatory practice. The latter interpretation resonates with the perspective put forth by Jane Juffer (2006) who introduced the notion of “domestic intellectuals”, suggesting a more liberating and emancipatory understanding of single motherhood.

While acknowledging the potential merits of recognising single mothers’ agency through this approach, my overall intention is to challenge this binary within the framework of decolonial feminism. I emphasise that the identity of a single mother should not be cast as the direct opposite of a married or non-single mother. Instead, it represents a transient and intensely contested

subject position that, through the lens of decolonial feminism, rejects being relegated to “the other,” “the negative,” or “the failed” counterpart of the conventional norm of a happy, heteronormative family. In line with this perspective, my objective is to advocate for an alternative interpretation and, ultimately, to liberate motherhood from the constraints of this binary conceptualisation. Thus, this thesis ends with an invitation to engage in a collective exercise of imagination.

With regard to the mothers who expressed discontent with the label “single mother”, I discern several conceptual trajectories that revolve around temporality, personhood, liberation, diverse subjectivities and autonomy:

“I know this state is temporary.” (Rasa)

“When my son turned 18 – I became free. I ceased to be a single mother and became a person again.” (Lina)

“This is only one of my many dimensions.” (Rima)

“I am an independent mother, not a single mother.” (Gabija)

In conclusion, I want to assert a feminist standpoint that reframes motherhood from being a *natural* phenomenon to a historically, culturally and socially constructed category of analysis that is full of contradictions, tensions, and contestations, and which places heteronormative and material expectations upon the shoulders of women (*see* Rich, 1976/1995; Silva, 1996). Acknowledging motherhood as a highly contextualised social and historical construct reveals its inherently political and contested nature, positioning it as a significant arena for further inquiry. Herein, such terms as agency and resistance, as well as the process of meaning-making in general, should be increasingly defined by the mothers themselves.

6. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: PRECARIOUS MOTHERHOOD AND HORIZONS OF CARE

In this thesis, I have examined the everyday lives of well-educated single mothers in Lithuania. The aim of this study was to see how a gendered subject – a woman and a mother – navigates the challenges of everyday life in a post-socialist semi-periphery. Through engaging in single mothers’ daily practices by way of ethnography, I analysed precarity not only as a material condition, but also as a structure and a destabilising concept that intersects with issues of class, gender, family, social reproduction and care. Hence, in this study, precarity also denotes experiences of vulnerability, dependency, and negotiation, in a much broader sense than that of individual economic instability.

The findings of my research have elucidated the intricate interplay between single motherhood and prevailing systems of capitalism and patriarchy, shedding light on how precarity produces both hegemonic attitudes and micro resistances. By examining precarity as structural and gendered, this study conveyed the everyday practices and strategies among well-educated single mothers in post-socialist, contemporary Lithuania. One of the overarching contributions of this thesis is the ethnographically grounded insight that precarity is not entirely an economic issue. It is also a matter of care. Accounting for care reveals that insecurity for single mothers is manifold and that focusing only on wage-labour is an overly narrow view that amounts to a form of “economistic reductionism” (Butler, 2013, p. 41), which disregards gaps and uncertainties related to the provision of affective and care labour.

To examine *care* in terms of labour in this dissertation has meant several things. Firstly, it was crucial to illustrate how caring is, to a significant degree, a gendered form of unpaid labour, which becomes especially visible in times of crises (e.g., Covid-19) and austerity. Secondly, it helped to provide an alternative academic reading of single motherhood, shifting the discourse away from the usual dominant themes of poverty, resilience, strength, and an almost celebratory sacrifice, to a pool of complex personal stories, experi-

ences and affects. Finally, I demonstrate how care, despite contributing to the reproduction of existing gender inequalities, also holds a subversive potential for (feminist) (anti-capitalist) resistance and critique, even though the forms of collective resistance to structural injustice are not yet fully articulated.

In the realm of scholarly dialogue, the exploration of structural precarity and care contributes to both social reproduction theory and feminist discussions concerning gender within post-socialist, semi-peripheral contexts. The endeavour to integrate several academic disciplines, such as gender studies, political anthropology and decolonial studies, has fostered alternative modes of expression and has helped to transcend disciplinary confines. This interplay of academic fields has also facilitated connections between areas of research that were not traditionally linked. For instance, making valuable junctions between precarity studies, social reproduction theory and a decolonial perspective introduced significant considerations about the material and socio-psychological well-being of single mothers, allowing the discussion to acquire a more holistic approach. Instead of examining everyday life as isolated within different domains, I have drawn a map of interconnected nodal points.

The image of a map also helps to navigate through tensions that arise from the binary oppositions between the seemingly separate epistemic landscapes of the centre and a semi-periphery, capitalism and socialism, resilience and resistance, submission and agency, success and failure, and productive and reproductive. Drawing on women's life stories, I will end this dissertation by offering those tensions to the scrutiny of a transformation-bound feminist reading. Hence, in this concluding chapter, I will give an overview of my findings and place my contribution within the scholarly field.

Precarity and downward mobility in post-socialist Lithuania

My first empirical chapter (Chapter 3) exposed how precarity and precariousness is experienced in the everyday lives of single mothers in Lithuania. My approach aimed at re-examining precarity, revealing tensions and contradictions defined by the intersection of gender, class, level of education and geopolitical circumstances in the experiences of the single mothers in this study.

The pervasive themes of a lack of resources, material stability, and a sense of insecurity and unpredictability, underpinned every action and conversation that I had during my fieldwork. This condition of precarity extended

beyond the realm of paid work (production) and permeated into the sphere of unpaid work (social reproduction), including matters of love and care. What my research has shown is how precarity and precariousness manifest in a post-socialist context in relation to gender.

In Lithuania, precarity is experienced differently compared to places where precarious living has been a pattern passed down through generations (see Standing, 2011; Ross, 2009). As Berlant (2011, p. 20) points out, “[p]eople born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected”. The research participants, driven by aspirations nurtured through higher education, pertaining to their class, social and cultural capital, found themselves at a juncture of despair and disillusionment. The analytical term, proposed by Narotzky and Besnier (2014, p. S4) in their research on crisis and hope, “breakdown of expectations”, holds significant relevance here. While other studies have shown that precarity and precarisation develop distinctively based upon various factors, such as context, class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. (McRobbie, 2011; Eriksson, 2018), in the Lithuanian context, the transition from socialism to neoliberal capitalism has contributed to the perpetuation of larger inequalities and a gradual erosion of social protection, resulting in a very real and systemic precarisation of life experiences for many people.

Empirical examples from my long-term fieldwork have elucidated the sense of *precarity* and *precariousness* as a shared ontological condition that single mothers often felt and identified. However, in addition to revealing this overarching experience of shared vulnerability, indicating the impossibility of a completely autonomous life, this thesis also presents a powerful argument for the proposition that there is a particular “characteristic of neoliberal regimes to allocate disposability and precarity” (Butler 2013, p. 20). According to Butler (*ibid*, p. 21),

[t]his is especially important to remember if we want to understand the difference between precarity as an existential category that is presumed to be equally shared, and precarity as a condition of induced inequality and destitution. The latter is a way of exploiting an existential condition, since precarity, understood as a vulnerability to injury and loss, can never be reversed (this I tend to call precariousness), and yet the differential ways of allocating precarity, of assigning disposability, are clearly aims and effects of neoliberal forms of social and economic life.

From an intersectional point of view, the dimensions of class, gender, geopolitical and socioeconomic situation intertwine to produce the particular position of my research participants, which I will further discuss in this concluding chapter.

The ambiguity of class

Against the backdrop of a global capitalist system and a more flexible labour market, escalating precarity produces a fragmented global class structure with increasingly complicated subdivisions (*see Casas-Cortés, 2014; Kalb, 2015*). Nevertheless, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, the category of class retains its usefulness in multiple respects. Firstly, it remains relevant in terms of economic and cultural resources, encompassing property ownership, material possessions and general material conditions, and, secondly, as a bearer of class-related normativity, expectations and fantasies (Camfield, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984/1996; Skeggs, 1997/2002; Standing, 2011; Berlant, 2012).

Adhering to the classical Marxist perspective, the first dimension places my research participants in a distinct working-class position, rendering them as labourers striving for a living wage, who cheaply and flexibly sell their labour power while expending their life energy on unpaid reproductive work. The second dimension is closely tied to neoliberal notions of the “new democracy,” “globalised world,” “autonomous individualism,” and “personal freedom”. My thesis illustrates how this point is reiterated by the intergenerational ties and expectations passed down to single mothers from their mothers, reinstating a fleeting, yet solid concept of class as “a discursive, historically specific construction, a product of middle-class political consolidation, which includes elements of fantasy and projection” (Skeggs, 1997/2002, p. 5).

Importantly, the implementation of neoliberalism in Lithuania was facilitated by a stark contrast between the two regimes – Soviet and neoliberal – and their distinct conceptions of autonomy and individual freedoms.¹³² The socialist era was characterised by permanent and often lifelong positions not only in terms of one’s job, but also one’s social and class standing) as well as standardised career paths. In contrast, the new era ushered in opportunities for liberty, autonomy, self-expression, individual choice and greater flexi-

¹³² Like other researchers who have explored the subsistence of single mothers (*see Fox, 2006; Yazdanpanah, 2008; Utrata, 2015; Härkönen, 2018*), my study has revealed the gift-wrapping of precarity by neoliberalism into an attractive package of freedom and flexibility.

bility in both personal and professional life. Such opportunities were embraced and celebrated (Bielskienė, 2020). The concept of the working class seemingly disappeared from public discourse alongside the fall of the Soviet regime, while the promise of personal freedom offered equal prospects for all to attain middle-class living standards. Nevertheless, as my research has shown, despite aspirations for higher social status formed against the backdrop of their recollections of past immobility, and despite their dreams of an improved life in the new democratic setting, precarity has become the prevailing norm for single mothers, leaving them grappling with the challenges of navigating through this structural uncertainty and trying to make sense of their experiences, expectations and entitlements as citizens, women, mothers, workers and consumers.

These women demonstrate a remarkable level of resilience, which, according to Diprose (2015), is a product of navigating through intense precarious conditions, to which the increasingly insecure neoliberal subject must adapt to manage existence in an unpredictable reality. Despite their university diplomas and skills, the single mothers in my research continually negotiate between the symbolic benefits of supposedly elevated social status and the actual opportunities available to them for earning a living. This negotiation process forms an integral part of their daily existence as they try to situate themselves in terms of their class positioning. The mismatch between, on the one hand, their presumed class position, along with their level of education, and, on the other hand, their actual realities, constitutes a large part of Chapter 3.

When speaking about [...] economical things, again... I have a full-time job. I work a lot. And in Lithuanian standards I earn a decent salary. Not much, but manageable. So that me and my son can literally *survive* [emphasises]. However, whenever I have a chance to take up some additional work, whatever the size of that project, a gig or a side job, whether it is for 20, 100 or 1,000 Euros – it doesn't matter, I take them all. I mean, if it's possible to earn any sum of money, I always do it. (Rima, spring 2017)

This excerpt weaves together various threads of my discussion on material conditions, resilience and mothering practices, all of which are intrinsically intertwined with gendered norms and expectations that are both internalised and employed as tools of governmentality (Lorey, 2015). For single mothers, engaging in paid employment becomes the sole means of securing the necessary resources to satisfy the needs of their families. Perceived primarily as a private matter, this necessity places a significant burden on individual

responsibility to perform paid work, participate in a gig economy, continuously network, engage in re-training and education. This pursuit of success intensifies the demands on women's time, attention and self-management (Folbre, 2006; Lorey, 2017). Juggling time, investing in personal growth and striving to become a more flexible, productive and "efficient worker" in the labour market, while simultaneously managing time and energy resources to be a "good mother", requires a lot of individual effort, consideration and creativity.

The inheritance of creativity

The ethnographic examples provided in my research underscore creativity as an epitome of single mothers' efforts to make ends meet. My research participants often referred to a skill or ability known as "Soviet creativity", which is arguably inherited from the previous generation. This creativity is rooted in navigating through times of extreme thrift, enduring long-term deficiencies and facing scarcities of essential food and goods – experiences that were common during the Soviet era. The culture of frugality and repair, cultivated by single mothers' parents during those times, seems to have had a lasting impact upon them. Many single mothers in my study view this form of "special creativity" as instrumental in traversing their own precarious circumstances.

The practices emerging in my ethnographic fieldwork are similar to those present in what Ekaterina Gerasimova and Sofia Chuikina (2009) call, in reference to Soviet society, a "repair society". According to the authors, the culture of permanent repair is seen "as a form of creativity and lifestyle [which] was not the lot of the dispossessed but an experience shared by most of the population" (Gerasimova & Chuikina, 2009, p. 70). The culture of repair and frugality is now an essential aspect of single mothers' daily lives, and it is articulated as both a lifestyle and a means to handle everyday life.

Indeed, the creativity and ingenuity exhibited by single mothers in navigating their circumstances is hardly unique to post-Soviet societies. Anthropologists studying war, disaster and emergency situations have also observed how, in times of crisis, people demonstrate remarkable inventiveness in sustaining themselves and building livelihoods. The creative methods and unpredictable paths undertaken by single mothers to secure their lives undoubtedly align with the resourcefulness often witnessed in crisis situations. In a way, it could be regarded as "operational resilience", as suggested by Christou and Michail (2018, p. 86): "a constellation of agentic practices

and processes that allows them to adapt to changing patterns of social life, be that post-socialism, migration, crises”.

This valuable insight linking generational narratives about the hardships of daily life and practices of motherhood helps to shed light on the ways in which single mothers’ experiences and strategies share common threads with those of others in diverse contexts characterised by instability. By recognising the resourcefulness and adaptability of these women, we gain a deeper understanding of the importance of creativity against the backdrop of the recent history of communism.

Precarity and gender

Importantly, this thesis has emphasized that engaging in a discussion of precarity that only focused on class would overlook significant differences and reproduce silences. While this study has demonstrated the intricate relationship between precarity and class, it has also contributed to the acknowledgment that discourse on precarity cannot be blind to gender. Relying on feminist activists, such as the Madrid-based feminist activist-research collective *Precarias a la deriva*¹³³, and notable feminist scholars (Federici, 2012; Casas-Cortés, 2014; Fraser, 2016; 2017; Lorey, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2017a), I have challenged a gender-neutral perspective on precarity by offering empirical examples of gender-based inequalities.

The different experiences of single parents according to their gender differences must not be overlooked, for the notions of freedom and flexibility propagated by the new democratic regime hold distinct implications for mothers and fathers. The daily realities of my research participants differed significantly from those of fathers, who have allegedly embraced the promises of freedom and independence through wage labour, flexible entrepreneurship or emigration. The relevance of the post-socialist context is especially visible here: in a semi-periphery that provides a cheap labour force, contributing to the huge rates of emigration, the women who stay make decisions based on necessity rather than some freedom of choice (*see* Boatcă, 2006a; 2016).

The narratives about absent fathers in single mothers’ lives illuminate the persisting gender-specific divisions between paid, productive and unpaid, reproductive labour, which remain inadequately addressed. According to German researcher Isabel Lorey (2017, p. 203), while “[g]overning through

¹³³ *Precarias a la deriva* (2004). *Drift through the circuits of feminized precarious work*. Retrieved October 30, 2017, from <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0704/precarias1/en>.

precarisation is no longer fundamentally founded on the gender-hierarchical and heteronormative dichotomy of autonomy and dependency”, the new de-collectivisation, de-securisation, privatisation of public social services results in new inequalities, which continue to be gendered. Relying on social reproduction theorists and voluminous ethnographic material, this thesis re-localises this discrepancy and inequality of precarity in the material conditions by explaining that “[w]omen are usually those who stay, not due to lack of initiative or traditional restraints, but because they are those who have been made to feel most responsible for the reproduction of their families” (Federici, 2012, p. 104).

Thus, the next part of this concluding chapter will summarize the results in relation to social reproduction, highlighting the implications of gendered inequalities. Shedding light on the multi-layered concept of care, the next section reveals my contribution to the ongoing debates on gender, labour and social justice.

Social reproduction and the politisation of care

In the initial empirical chapter, considerable emphasis was placed on illustrating and analysing strategies employed by single mothers in response to material and subsistence-related issues. Chapter 4 and 5 sharpened the focus on the existential aspect of precariousness, as articulated by Judith Butler (2004), delving into the questions of the precariousness of life and destabilisation of life forms and phantasies (Berlant, 2011; Puar, 2012). Constructing a more solid, ethnographically located definition of precarity, this thesis has demonstrated the complexity of precariousness that permeates all spheres of life, including kinship, friendship, love, and care.

The title of my dissertation aptly reflects the profound significance and centrality of the concept of care. The double meaning implicates a subtle contradiction in that “to care” as a means of survival and *to actually care about* your own life are two very different things. The manifold essence of care, thus, encapsulates the tension between its instrumental function within the larger societal framework and its intrinsic value as a daily practice that profoundly shapes and influences individual lives and experiences. Hence, this dissertation has analytically examined three dimensions of *care*: (1) care as (feminised/unpaid) labour that keeps sustaining capitalist relations and reproducing a hegemonic (gender/class) regime, (2) a care gap, signified by a lack of care, and (3) care as a (potential) site of resistance.

Care as labour

Throughout this thesis I have argued and illustrated that care is a form of labour, along with other types of reproductive work, both formal and informal, paid and unpaid. This work is crucial for society's survival, particularly during times of austerity, when state support is diminishing and social services are being increasingly privatised. The single mothers explain that they care for their children with dedication. They make efforts to support their dependents even at the expense of their own needs. For mothers, failing to perform this reproductive work would not only affect the lives and well-being of their dependents, but also, for some of them, deprive their lives of meaning.

Hence, this dissertation sheds more light on the under-recognised role of care and reproductive labour in contemporary society. While reproductive labour was evident in my ethnographic encounters with single mothers, it was not often explicitly articulated as such by the mothers themselves. The indispensability of care was often overlooked, yet there were instances when my research participants seemed to really comprehend the magnitude of the matter:

Only now I realised... I was thinking, but wait, actually I *was* a devoted mother to my children and to my family. I did as best I could. I truly did everything with a lot of effort... (Liucija)

Wait, but this is a major work. I'm actually producing a human being! Why am I not getting paid for it? (Gabija)

According to Lorey (2017, p. 204), “[a]lthough the neoliberal flexibilization of working conditions signifies a flexibilization of family conditions, it does not necessarily change the hierarchically organized gendered distribution of labour”. Hence, despite a slight shift towards gender equality in terms of a higher economic independence of women, the area where old gender inequalities remain strikingly apparent is the sphere of social reproduction. The empirical evidence gathered in this study unequivocally demonstrates that the labour of caregiving continues to be essentialised and predominantly feminised, burdening mothers, grandmothers and mothers-in-law disproportionately. Through a comprehensive examination of how care work is managed by single mothers and women in their social circles, this thesis also highlights the ideological underpinnings of the widespread belief that care is inherently suited to women. This perpetuates a patriarchal and unequal division of labour, wherein waged work is valued higher than care work,

resources are unequally distributed, and the prevailing norms of the nuclear family system further exploit women's labour under neoliberal capitalism (*see* Fraser, 2009; Milligan & Wiles, 2010; Federici, 2012; Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014a).

The care gap

This brings me to the second aspect that my thesis has undertaken for analysis: the absence of care, commonly referred to as the care gap. Within the context of single motherhood, the issue of absent fathers – who “don't care”, “leave” and “abandon” – emerged as hints, remarks or sad jokes. The “weak”, “irresponsible”, “free”, “immature” men, in the words of my research participants, while not directly present in the scope of my research, retained a consistent figurative presence. On the intersubjective level, there were emotions and affects in relation to fathers who “do not care”. From the analytical point of view, it became apparent how subjectivities of both men and women are produced by the same system that operates assigning distinct roles within segregated and gendered domains of productive and reproductive labour (Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2012; Arruzza et al, 2018).

As in other parts of the post-socialist region (*see* Gal & Kligman, 2000, p. 116), the emancipated, self-sufficient women in my research did not express eagerness for increased autonomy from husbands and male partners but rather wished for fathers' increased involvement in the reproductive sphere. Nevertheless, the transition from socialism to the neoliberalism of the market economy, imbued with the ideals of democratic freedom, emancipation and individual agency, has conceivably played a role in the proliferation of single-mother households, exposing the problem of absent fathers and a gendered dimension of precarity. According to Lithuanian researchers Bučaitė-Vilkė and Tereškinas (2016, p. 211), precarious life conditions in post-socialist Lithuania produced a particular social vulnerability for many, a condition in which women have been taking on a double burden, while men employed their coping strategies in alignment with the neoliberal ideology of liberation, social mobility, personal aspirations and self-expression. Within a functioning traditional patriarchal gender order, “[t]he feeling of freedom, avoidance of family obligations, and lack of long-term commitments” are seen as a particular response to prevailing precarity in Lithuania (*ibid*, p. 211).

Neoliberal acceleration also “took care” of an element of social services and job securities by privatising large segments of education, health services, childcare provision, executing the cuts on public services and further flexibilising the market. Nancy Fraser (2016) illuminates the global connec-

tion in a current, debt-tied world, where capital “cannibalizes labour, disciplines states, transfers wealth from periphery to core, and sucks value from households, families, communities and nature” (Fraser, 2016, p. 113). It is true that neoliberal regimes promote state and corporate disinvestment from public services and social welfare, leaving the capitalist economy to free-ride on activities of provisioning and caregiving that are inherent in producing the society and maintaining social bonds (Fraser, 2016, p. 112–113; Bhattacharya, 2017a, p. 23). This phenomenon has been recognised and termed “governmental precarization” by Isabel Lorey (2015). This conceptual framework has proven valuable in underlining the significance of welfare systems, which bear the potential to mitigate vulnerability and precarious circumstances, given the presence of political determination.

Although not always explicitly articulated, the subtle disappointments regarding the state’s lack of concern or inadequate attention to the needs of single mothers and their children were present throughout my fieldwork. The figures of “uncaring men” and an “indifferent state” were incessantly present, deepening a sense of the conspicuous care deficit. Consequently, women were compelled to shoulder the responsibility of bridging this care gap by performing unpaid reproductive and affective labour, thus continuously upholding prevailing neoliberal economies (Craven, 2014; Eriksson, 2018; Saar & Aavik, 2021).

Chapter 3 analysed support offered by parents, parents-in-law, extended family members, and less frequently, neighbours, friends and colleagues within the workplace. By scrutinising the significance of familial bonds, lines of inheritance, gendered norms, expectations and intricate historical contexts, emphasis was placed on supplementary aid that facilitates the life of single mothers. Be it in the form of tangible resources, financial assistance, emotional backing, housing provision or childcare assistance, all these facets are pivotal in improving the everyday lives of all my research participants. Consequently, the absence of such assistance and attention proved to be profoundly distressing.

Notably, there were several silences in the narratives of single mothers concerning care provision and caregiving solutions. The prevailing care deficit in my study was primarily associated with absent fathers, uncooperative mothers (their own), and a seemingly indifferent state. However, notions of non-market-driven cooperative approaches, collective arrangements or communal caregiving provisions were rarely articulated. Aligning with the stance of Anderson and Moore (2014), I contend that these silences

hold considerable weight in revealing the limitations of political imagination and mobilisation.

Care as resistance

I have illuminated the contradictory nature of care and love labour. The argument that I have offered in this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it relates to the care gap (Fraser 2016) produced by intergenerational tensions when the mothers of single mothers' do not offer enough assistance and care. On the other hand, care as resistance is articulated by various practices where mutual care and self-care produces a sense of agency and empowerment.

Attending to my first argument, Chapter 5 of this thesis analysed the patriarchal predisposition for a mother to fail, especially for a single mother. The narratives that often invoke "familial failure" carry relentless feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness. The striving for success within a neoliberal framework is driven by sacrificial love and motherly devotion, which is culturally anticipated from all the mothers in this study. It was vastly demonstrated that the single mothers in my research expected more attention, care and assistance in childcare from their own mothers rather than from the (absent) fathers of their children. Hence, the mothers who did not provide support for their adult daughters were seen as unloving and judgmental. The disillusionment about an idealised vision of a mother-daughter tandem was experienced as a huge disappointment, while the perceived lack of maternal care produced a sense of increased existential precariousness and vulnerability.

However, I have argued that what my research participants interpreted as their mothers' refusal to care contributed to single mothers' self-reflexivity and recovered agency. According to Scott-Myhre (2018, p. 94), the mother-daughter nexus is a powerful one, which contains not only the scenario of reproducing gender norms but also bears the potentiality for "subversion and revolt in the face of the patriarchy". Therefore, while the process of negotiation between the mother and daughter has proved to be painful for my research participants, it has also served as a destabilising force, contributing to new revelations about care as labour, the institution of nuclear family and middle-class normality, unrealistic demands for motherhood and guilt-ridden, sacrificial and isolated practices of childrearing.

As one of my research participants clearly stated, attempting to fulfil the role of a "perfect mother" would only lead to her becoming a "miserable mother" who disregards her own needs in order to match societal expectations. An unhappy mother, thus, would only produce an unhappy child. Such

cases of micro resistances highlight the limited options mothers have in terms of care provision and invite further examination of whether an authentic and/or radical resistance is truly possible under the regimes of neoliberalism. However, by shedding light on the normative expectations around care and maternal sacrifice, the research participants reflect on and eventually discard such concepts as “heroism”, “perfect motherhood”, “a normal life”, embracing instead the new horizons of “healthy egoism”, “re-orientation” and recognition of collective responsibility.

Towards the end of this study, my research participant Liucija stated: “Enough is enough. I lost all the power, and I stop here. I thought, so radical! And then I see that when I stop – nothing collapses: children are still taken care of. [...] My dear God, why didn’t I stop earlier?”. Hence, such “refusal to care” and filling the care gap with the help of others translates into reclaiming one’s agency. Such micro gestures of resistance are a necessary part of collective unlearning and reinventing the institution of motherhood in a decolonial spirit.

Expanding upon the preceding discussion, my second argument was derived from single mothers’ narratives about self-care and communal spaces for mutual care. The imagined forms of a more collective everyday living were expressed as a way to strengthen social bonds, increase solidarity and minimise the pressures of individualistic, privatised family lives (*see* Brenner & Haaken, 2000). In this dissertation, following the stories of my researcher participants, I have argued that taking care of oneself and having safe spaces to care for each other is an essential part of single mothers’ strategies to manage the harsh conditions of everyday life.

In the spirit of resistance and decolonial thinking

Epistemological and methodological contributions

As a feminist researcher and activist, my commitment inherently aligns with fostering positive change and transformative shifts. This resonates deeply with the perspectives of highly inspirational feminist thinkers like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981/2015), who regard transformation as the primary purpose of feminism and writing. In the context of my research, transformations emerged as an integral part of an extended trajectory, although at times their subtlety made it challenging to capture them within the confines of an academic text. Nevertheless, on these last pages, it is crucial to acknowledge that my research participants proved to be the most profound educators, offering insights not only about everyday life as single

mothers, but also about the dynamics of everyday resistance, encompassing both failures and triumphs.

Influenced by my feminist research sensibilities and guided by ethical considerations laid out in the *Good Research Practice* guidelines (2017) approved by the Swedish Research Council, my approach drew extensively from feminist activist ethnography and decolonial studies. This fusion was aimed at producing a more ethical and transformative framework for my study. Building upon the insights of scholars like Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis (2013), I undertook my fieldwork with a perspective that interweaves feminist ethnography with a steadfast commitment to the well-being of my research participants and the issues that are significant to *them* (Pink, 2009; Craven & Davis, 2013). Adhering to the principles outlined in the *Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics* (2013), I immersed myself in the research process on behalf of single mothers. I maintained a close connection, standing in solidarity with them as they faced their day-to-day life challenges, embodying a decolonial research position.

This approach doesn't seek permission but instead takes a firm stance – a quintessential gesture within the framework of decolonial methodology, where reclaiming and valuing local knowledge and the ways of knowledge production, focusing on the context, and engaging in the critique of power is at the very centre of research ethics (see Tlostanova, 2014; Koobak, 2020). My decolonial standpoint was defined by staying accountable to my research participants, aiming at social justice through a transformative praxis, as well as challenging the confines of academic norms associated with coloniality and objectivity.

Guided by insights from prominent decolonial scholars (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Lugones, 2010; Icaza, 2017), I sought to unveil inherent power relations within the dominant epistemology, a system that employs universal tools to hierarchise, validate, measure and disregard specific groups and experiences. “Social sciences find themselves in the grip of both ideological servility and necessity of serving the power to survive, and recent unsubstantiated demands of this very power to make the local social sciences globally competitive in their knowledge production” (Tlostanova, 2015b, p. 52). By embracing my education in gender and decolonial studies, I was able to reflect on my ambiguous academic-activist role, post-socialist positionality, acknowledge my privileges within the field and spot the “intellectual inferiority complex” (Tlostanova, 2015b, p. 52), informed by my post-socialist subject position.

Awareness of my positionality, enabled me to tap into the lived experiences and embodied vulnerabilities of Lithuanian women, thereby engaging in a critical re-evaluation of “the geo and body politics of knowledge” (Icaza, 2017, p. 29). Aligned with decolonial principles, I have actively considered my research participants as true “experts” in the field. The locus of knowledge production is centred around their voices, experiences, narratives and emotions against the backdrop of the post-socialist semi-periphery. My primary concern was to listen, foster a connection based on trust, attentiveness and care, and to ensure a reciprocal exchange of insights and perspectives, as well as to co-create sustainable networks and connections.

Transformation, agency and resistance

In my preliminary pursuit of identifying agency and political will, I grappled with the challenge of locating authentic sites of resistance in the mundane. Initially, my prior academic conditioning and activist background limited my perception of resistance to more conventional forms of organised, visible, and overt political engagement, typically associated with public spaces (Pink, 2012; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013). The absence of these seemingly “glamorous elements of political life”, as aptly put by Sarah Pink (2012, p. 4), led me to contemplate and interrogate my own preconceptions in order to adjust my perspective in line with a decolonial approach. I must admit that my preconceived notions of counter-hegemonic struggles often proved to be misleading. Moreover, the dichotomy between resilience and resistance, frequently perceived as somewhat oppositional, manifested in my fieldwork as relational and interwoven rather than mutually exclusive. According to Rosalba Icaza (2017, p. 31), the everyday history of oppression is also an everyday history of resistance, whereas a clear demarcation between the two is futile. This research has illustrated that neither moments of resilience nor practices of resistance are static, fixed or clearly conceptualised and separated.

In the words of the decolonial feminist philosopher Maria Lugones (2010, p. 746), “[r]esistance is the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required for the oppressing \leftrightarrow resisting relation being an active one”. In other words, when we talk about resistance it doesn’t have to be maximal liberation or political struggle, rather it is the possibility of it, which is “both adaptive and creatively oppositional” (ibid, p. 746).

Unfolding the concept of “creativity” in this thesis is my contribution to a better understanding of the post-socialist context and of the micro ways of

resistance against a mainstream culture that is still not very welcoming to single mothers. By engaging in DIY practices, constructing, fixing or making things, growing their own food and cooking home-made meals, looking for opportunities in unexpected places, etc., single mothers prove and exercise their agency. The examples described in this study are not merely ways of increasing their economic well-being but are also components of the women's subjectivity, which inform their lifestyle and provide some deeper meaning. I argue that this kind of everyday creativity provides the women with self-confidence and pride, especially when they manage to sustain themselves and their children by staying largely outside of the logic of money circulation. It can also be interpreted as a kind of resistance to capitalism that runs on a colonial, patriarchal logic.

The notion of “operational resilience”, proposed by Christou and Michail (2018), serves as a meaningful bridge between post-socialist scholarship and decolonial studies. As subjects from the post-socialist region, the women in my research can be perceived as notably adaptable and adept at navigating challenging circumstances. Nevertheless, my research has shown a more nuanced reality: single mothers demonstrated not only a high degree of reflexivity amid their circumstances but also managed to “bounce back” (James, 2015). Relying on Lugones (2010, p. 746), I argue that women's resistant subjectivity has expressed itself “infra-politically, rather than in a politics of the public”. This turn is political, yet directed inward, toward collective liberation within the networks of care and across communities. These subtle forms of everyday resistance were observed when single mothers were using creativity and inventiveness, assisting each other beyond monetary transactions, asking for help and providing care to themselves and each other.

This thesis underscores the fact that instances of everyday resistance are often fundamentally triggered by rupture and a sense of failure, which leads to embracing one's inherent vulnerability. In this regard, I agree with social researchers who suggest that shattered dreams and aspirations – whether for an idyllic nuclear family life, basic social security, or general well-being – significantly contribute to the cultivation of alternative narratives and micro-level acts of resistance (see Casas-Cortés, 2014; Narotzky & Besnier, 2014; Lindqvist, 2015). This rupture serves as a catalyst for the emergence of a new starting point, a new axis for daily resistance and a new possibility for “re-existence” (Tlostanova, 2017). Virginija and Ūla demonstrated their attempt to push boundaries of productivity and strict time-management by slowing down and carving out time to “enjoy” the experiences of motherhood. Liucija

just “stopped” and observed with astonishment that the world did not crumble. Karolina made a conscious decision to reject the path of sacrificial, guilt-laden and discontented motherhood, opting instead to lead a life of fulfilment. Notably, in neither of these instances did the single mothers forsake their responsibilities to their children. However, the focus shifted towards recognising the reproductive labour, prioritising their own well-being and adopting practices of self-care.

As Angela Davis (2016) emphasised in an interview on radical healing work: “Self-care and healing and attention to the body and the spiritual dimension – all of this is now a part of radical social justice struggles.” From my perspective, the strategies of single mothers constitute a crucial part of the global endeavour for social justice, wherein “individual impulses and interior lives, the intimate and banal details of family histories and personal experiences, are directly connected to external forces” (Hobart and Kneese, 2020, p. 1). Radical care and self-care are not only vital, but sometimes revolutionary for single mothers.

As Madina Tlostanova (2010) observes, along with practices of unlearning, a new learning takes place, helping to shift from the rhetoric of sorrow and criticism to that of acknowledgment and affirmation of distinct needs, unique experiences and legitimate demands. Through the sharing of thoughts and emotions, the reciprocal provision of care and the collective assembly to “evaluate, rethink, and reimagine social reproduction in order to contribute to bold, emancipatory futures” (Braeley & Luxton, 2015, p. xii), the women in my research became active agents of resistance towards “re-existence” (*see* Tlostanova, 2010; Tlostanova et al., 2019).

In this light, I interpret the strategies of my research participants as an evolving process, a constellation of various agential practices (Christou and Michail, 2018), a resistant subjectivity and intersubjective affair (Lugones, 2010, p. 746). If nurtured and reciprocally supported, these strategies hold the potential for anti-patriarchal implications, paving the path to more organised movements or contributing to more clearly articulated demands for social justice. The nature of these demands, which could bring women “from a conservative definition of mothering as a biological destiny to mothering as liberating practice that can thwart runaway capitalism” (Ross 2016, p.xv), remains an open question.

Finally, over the course of this research, my research participants, in a true feminist and decolonial spirit, have repeatedly expressed their aspirations beyond the current logic of capitalism and neoliberalism. If lives could be directed away from the violent origins of the market logic, they might

possibly acquire new shapes grounded in cooperation rather than competition, creativity for joy rather than survival, commitment rather than indifference, love and mutual care rather than a marital contract of exploitation. Departing from the point of rupture with a shared sense of failure, collective vulnerability and interdependency, the women in my research are still imagining alternative futures in which mutual care and support are abundant and the very concept of “single mother” is perhaps devoid of meaning.

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What are the everyday life strategies of single mothers that help to effectively cope with daily hardships? What modes of resistance are employed, articulated or imagined by single mothers as they navigate their daily routines?

This is the premise of the study that offers an in-depth ethnographic study of well-educated single mothers in Kaunas, Lithuania – a post-socialist semi-periphery marked by structural precarity. Through feminist activist ethnography, this thesis examines how single mothers develop material, emotional, and social strategies to survive and care within conditions shaped by neoliberalism, insufficient welfare systems, and societal stigma. The concept of care is placed at the centre of this dissertation, highlighting care labour as often unpaid and invisibilized, yet – central to single mothers' lives, constituting both a burden and a potential site of resistance. This thesis also examines how normative ideals of family, motherhood, and success intersect with class, gender, and labour to shape women's lived experiences.

Laura Lapinskė is a gender and sexuality scholar at Södertörn University. This study is her doctoral dissertation.

Gender Studies, Critical and Cultural Theory, School of Culture and Education & Baltic and East European Graduate School, Södertörn University.

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