LIVING IN PRECARITY: ETHNOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY STRUGGLES OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN LITHUANIA

Život u prekarijatu: etnografija svakodnevnih borbi samohranih majki u Litvaniji

ABSTRACT This paper presents challenges and life strategies of highly educated single mothers in Lithuania. My ethnography traces the impact of strategies of remaining in a country where exit strategies – alcoholism, suicide, emigration – prevail and seem as an “easier” option. It is a study concerned with the relationship between precarity, single motherhood, social reproduction and everyday living. I focus on precarious living conditions, social isolation and stigmatization, unappreciated and highly gendered care-work. Based on collaborative ethnographic fieldwork material, the paper presents the micro-level attempts to negotiate what it means to be a lone care-taker, to revalorize and challenge the hegemonic narratives of individual strength and success.

KEYWORDS: ethnography, single motherhood, reproductive labour, precarity, Lithuania

APSTRAKT Ovaj tekst prikazuje izazove životnih strategija visokoobrazovanih majki u Litvaniji. Moj etnografski postupak trasira uticaj strategije ostanka u zemlji u kojoj strategije bega – alkoholizam, samobistvo ili emigracija, preovlađuju i izgledaju kao “lakša” opcija. Ova studija se bavi odnosom između prekarijata, samohranog materinstva, društvene reprodukcije i svakodnevnog života. Fokusiram se na život u oskudici, društvenu izolaciju i stigmatizaciju, podcenjen i veoma urodnjen rad vezan za staranje o drugima. Zasnovano na kolaborativnom etnografskom terenskom materijalu, ovo istraživanje predstavlja pokušaje koji se odigravaju na mikro-nivou, a kojima se pregovara pozicija samohranog roditelja, i revalorizuje i preispituje hegemonijski narativ o individualnoj snazi i uspehu.

KLJUČNE REČI: etnografija, samohrano materinstvo, reproduktivni rad, prekarijat, Litvanija
Introduction

_Ethnographic Vignette: a Car with a Small Engine_

_Taxify_ expanded rapidly in Lithuanian cities in response to poorly functioning public transport system and widespread gig-economy. Its drivers work on their own, self-managing their working time and taking responsibility for their own social security and health insurance. Quite unexpectedly, a comfortable seat of _taxify_ car became one of the sites of my ethnographic fieldwork.

One night, shortly before Christmas 2016, in Kaunas I hail a ride via _Taxify_ app, and a tiny Peugeot arrives in only a few minutes. I open the door and see a woman in her 40s sitting by the wheel. Pleasantly surprised, I get in and engage in a conversation that lasts around 20 minutes. Our chat develops easily, inspired by mutual curiosity. Quickly I learn a fair deal about her background, education, economic situation and the ways she handles it.

Aura has been working as a taxi driver at _taxify_ for a month now, and is the only female driver in Kaunas, as far as she knows. She says she loves driving and likes this job a lot: “To go around those half-empty streets of Kaunas at night – it’s truly enjoyable! Especially, when you choose your own working hours.” Then I find out that she is a doctoral student at the _Lithuanian Institute of Energy_, researching renewable sources of wind energy. It is shocking how vastly the living conditions of a PhD student differ in Sweden and Lithuania.

Laura: I see that many well educated and highly qualified women are living in extremely poor and precarious conditions that get worse and worse with current political decisions. You know, when tens of thousands are emigrating each year, I’m curious how people who stay live their everyday lives in such quite difficult circumstances.

Aura: It’s not the right word “quite difficult!” It’s pure humiliation, what’s happening here. How can you live from that salary? It’s mockery! My scholarship is just a tiny bit bigger than the minimum salary [380 EUR in 2017]. I can’t survive from that and feed my kids. Thus, I’m glad that now I can add something to my stipend by driving people around Kaunas. [...] I manage to earn a little bit extra, because I have a very good car, which consumes little fuel, so this job pays off. Also, I work at nights and on weekends, when the rate is higher, so I earn more.

L: But you said you have four kids. How do you manage all these activities: raising kids, driving at night and studying at daytime?

A: My mom helps. She helps me a lot with kids. Well, they are not that little anymore, the biggest is 18 and the smallest – 4 years old. I bring the little ones to my mother on weekends and go to work. To this job, I mean.

_Taxify_, a car-hailing app from Estonia, backed by Chinese investment capital, marketed as cheaper version of American _Uber_, recently has gained huge popularity in Kaunas.
L: But when do you rest? It must be incredibly difficult to drive at night, when you have kids, household and studies waiting for you in the morning.

A: Well, I think I got used to it. I remember the times when we had to prepare for the exams and did it all during the nights. And we survived!

L: It must be really difficult to live like this, no?
A: Well, I have no choice. It’s ok.
(Fieldnote diary, December 2016)

This memorable late-night encounter with “superwoman” Aura taps into many of the themes of this article: the meaning of possession in the midst of dispossession, flexibilization and precarization of work, unpaid reproductive and – as it happens to be – feminized labour, restricted opportunities and immobility due to familial status, lack of resources. According to official statistics, migration rates are more than two times higher among married people than among divorced ones (in 2016 respectively – 12 889 and 5 255), which adds to the picture of single parents being immensely dependent on the family ties and other established social networks regarding childcare and reproductive labour in general. Emigrating and thus departing from that circle of care is likely to produce even bigger precarity, uncertainty and exclusion. It is a precise example of a single mother who is overworked and nearly poverty ridden. However, she is not a poor uneducated provincial woman, whose story is included in one of the sociological studies on social exclusion that I will overview shortly. Her story, like the stories of many other highly educated and at the same time highly precarious women is lurking somewhere in the blind spot – between the total poverty and despair and bright stories of success.

Her precarious situation is rather common: the flexible working hours, being your own boss and organizing your work when and as long as you want, is portrayed as a good catch by hegemonic narratives of Taxify marketing and innovation friendly policy in Lithuania. Having such a flexible job in addition to her main source of income (like PhD scholarship or maternity money) is considered by her a real luck. As little as owning a car can give her some privilege, allowing to use it as the means of production for earning subsistence. However, even a car would mean nothing, if she had no relatives, in addition to minimal institutional support, to rely on in terms of reproductive labour. Being a PhD student and a single mother of four, Aura could not manage her life without the support of her own mother. The heaps of care-work that are needed for her four children are taken over by another woman in the family. Thus, reproducing the patterns of feminized care labour, which goes unappreciated and unnoticed. One is more than lucky to have that support. In fact, the main thing that keeps single mothers and their children above the poverty line – the reserve army of feminine self-sacrifice – the grandmothers. (Utrata, 2015:138).)

The aim of this article is thus to illuminate the ways single mothers deal with precarious living conditions in urban settings of post-socialist Lithuania.

As a clearly defined social group, single mothers inhabit highly precarious and vulnerable position in the society, while still being rather heterogeneous group, when examined from intersectional perspective. Additionally, focusing on precarious, but on the other hand rather privileged women, helps to better understand the contradictions within the concepts of ‘class’, ‘labour’, ‘precarity’ and ‘exclusion’. By way of re-telling and analysing daily struggles of single mothers I aim to contribute to the debates on precarity, social reproduction theory and (feminist) knowledge production at the semi-periphery, where contemporary global challenges are met with particular local responses.

The article has three major parts: the first one consists of general introduction to the context, methodological landmarks and a brief overview of the theoretical standpoint. In the second part, I will present ethnographically informed findings on single mothers’ situation in Lithuania. This involves precarious living, stigmatization and isolation, a neoliberal push to straighten up and improve oneself, invisibility and unspeakability of reproductive and care labour. The third part consists of some glimpses from decolonial perspective into the micro-level counter-hegemonic acts that involve acknowledging the obscure aspects of hard labour, revaluing power relations and daily strategizing how to challenge the norms of living one’s daily life.

Lithuanian Context: Single Mothers
Between a Rock and a Hard Place

What followed the spectacular collapse of Soviet Union, was immediate restructuring of major industries, the initiation of land reforms and privatization of state property, accompanied by growing unemployment rates and implementation of neoliberal policies founded on a promise of economic growth. “One of the key reasons for such developments was prioritisation of economic policies over creation of generous social safety networks that were essential to prevent rapid deterioration of living standards within the population.” (Atas 2018: 17) The transition from state to market economy caused a shock-therapy with regular people bearing the cost of these transformations.

According to statistics, Lithuania remains one of the poorest countries in EU with one of the highest income inequality (Skučienė 2008:33). In 2013 around 30% of Lithuanian population was experiencing risk of poverty and social exclusion (Atas 2018). While the charts and graphs reported country’s economic advancement, the formal reports did not reveal increased hidden costs, social ties that are put in strict work regime and direct pressure to allow formal economic “growth” under aggressive austerity regime (Woolfson&Sommers 2016; Atas 2018). Moreover, unpaid reproductive labour, family networks and the system of remittances have been at the core of official growth reports (Kumar&Stauvermann 2014: 256).

Indeed, high expectations of a better life that independence struggles had promised to realize ended up in massive disillusionment (Baločkaitė 2009). Based on his extensive research on social exclusion, sexuality and wounded
masculinity, prominent Lithuanian sociologist and gender studies professor Artūras Tereškinas has been attempting to apprehend the two “national problems” since independence, namely – exceptionally high rates of emigration\(^4\) and suicide\(^5\) in Lithuania. Growing precarity and even poverty of working class people, deepening social exclusion and income inequality, normalized practices of marginalization and moralization in Lithuanian society are placed among primary factors of such morbid statistics (Bučaitė-Vilkė, Tereškinas 2016, Jackevičius 2017).

*Single mothers* is a social group that was especially affected by processes of transition, including neoliberal reforms of welfare system, impoverishment by dispossession, lack of affordable housing and childcare as well as overt stigmatization (Skučienė 2008). Recently, social exclusion and risk of poverty of single parents have gained more space in sociological research in Lithuania (Kuconytė-Būdelienė 2017; Stankūnienė et al. 2016; Maslauskaite 2014; Gustienė 2007; Kanopienė 2002). According to aforementioned studies, single mothers are facing inadequate living conditions primarily because they are the sole providers for the family. Institutional support is nearly absent for the expenditures for social protection in Lithuania are among the lowest in the EU (Aidukaite 2011). Moreover, general structural gender inequalities in the society are greatly present (e.g., worse positions in the formal labour market, lower earnings, and extensive amount of time necessary for unpaid reproductive and care labour) (Maslauskaite 2017: 614).

As the recent study by Lithuanian researchers (Stankūnienė, Baublytė and Maslauskaite 2016) illustrates, nearly one third of all underage children in Lithuania are raised by a single parent (27% in total, 23.1% with a single mother and 4% with a single father). This is a huge number in itself and in comparison to other EU countries.\(^6\) Based on the National census data from 2011, the majority of single mothers with underage children consist of divorced women (42.9%) and those who are married but live without a partner (29.4%) (Stankūnienė et al. 2016:83), whereas repartnering rates are relatively low (Maslauskaite & Baublytė 2015). It is important to note that every second single-parent family lives at risk of poverty. Despite suggested heterogeneity of the category “single mothers”, most of the findings conclude that women are much more likely to

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\(^4\) In the period between 1990 and 2006 nearly half a million citizens left the country, the peak numbers coinciding with entrance to EU in 2004 and financial crisis in 2008. 57 260 people emigrated in 2017 only (https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=55097f7e-fe39-470a-a395-b741787e5899#!/).

\(^5\) While European average is 14.1 suicides per 100 000 population, Lithuania has a suicide mortality rate of 32.7, with male suicides accounting for 47.1 and female – 8.1 per 100 000 population.

\(^6\) The population and housing census shows that families composed of lone parents (either a single mother with children or a single father with children) accounted for 16.0 % of the total number of families in the EU-28 in 2011. These were predominantly lone mother families, as they accounted for 13.4 % of all families, compared with 2.6 % for lone father families. (http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_in_the_EU_%E2%80%93_statistics_on_household_and_family_structures#Families).
face economic hardships than men when raising children alone and few, if any, variables could fix that injustice. Interestingly, according to a recent study by Maslauskaite (2017), women’s educational level turned out to be not significant in determining the perceived changes in the material well-being after the divorce, while direct link between education and economic stability was barely found (ibid: 627). These findings highlight the relevance of the term “precarity”, which contests the understanding of class with its assumed privileges.

Indeed, in terms of sociological research, single motherhood has been studied mostly in relation to socio-economical characteristics of mothers, wellbeing and risk of poverty of children and various parameters of social exclusion (Kanopienė 2002; Šileika and Zabarauskaitė 2008; Stankūnienė et al. 2016, Maslauskaite 2016; 2017). While the aforementioned studies highlight economic vulnerability of lower-educated, rural-residing, non-married mothers, and their dependency (of nearly 50%) on a formal social support system, I’m raising the questions that go beyond the impoverishment of single mothers as an excluded social class, questioning the prevalent discourse of a “loss” (Maslauskaite 2017) and the understanding of class itself. Through the recorded stories and observed lives of single mothers, I examine the meaning of precarity and responsibilization and highlight the invisibility and unspeakability of care work. Problematization of such concepts as marriage, family making and reproductive labour from the Marxist feminist point of view remains the kind of analysis that is rather absent from Lithuanian academic and public discourse. This is part of my contribution to the field that is still perceived as a minefield and, thus, rarely walked.

### Methodology and Researcher’s Positionality

While there is research being done on single mothers – statistical data retrieved, measurements made, correlations taken into account – there is little of their own voices to be heard. In the absence of any ethnographic research about lone parenthood in Lithuania, I’m together with Claire Hemmings and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trying to engage in feminist epistemologies and subvert the balance of which stories are precluded or marginalized, which “is always a question of power and authority.” (Hemmings, 2005:118)

I chose feminist ethnography as my primary method (Tsing 2005; Cerwonka & Malkki 2007; Dahl 2010; Ghodsee 2011), which helps to illuminate larger processes of precarization, analyze social structures, systems of oppression and

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7 One of the hypothesis of the 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 (Maslauskaite 2017: 618).

8 Even 25 years past, Lithuanian academia, generally speaking, is strongly resistant to engage in anything even vaguely connected to Marxism or socialism. In this, I’m together with Lithuanian sociologist Artūras Tereškinas (2017), who states that while Soviet past must have influenced our relationships and livelihoods deeply, continuing to put the blame exclusively on the Soviet traumas redirects our attention from looking around now, from actively engaging, pushing for changes in the “big” politics – demanding to reduce the poverty, erase the culture of stigmatization and mockery, find the ways to organize and solidarize.
possible transformations through studying their local enactments and mundane practices of everyday life. Immersed in an ethnographic fieldwork I allowed the processes of co-creation and transformation to inform my ongoing research, in a way of “improvisational flexibility.” Malkki (2007: 79). I recognize the influences of my own historical path, cultural situatedness and embodied knowledges, whereas my experiences – researcher’s subjectivity, if you will – are always implicated in the knowledge production process. Embracing the multiplicity of perspectives this research does not aim at “full and objective knowledge”, which had been since long discredited by feminist researchers (Haraway 1988), but rather offers a contribution to expanding a range of legitimate contextual interpretations.

Most of my research participants are highly educated cis-women with lots of intellectual, symbolic and cultural capital, good analytical skills and (self)reflexivity – a set of assets that, paradoxically, does not guarantee a direct access to a better life, although still carries some elevated expectations of it. Co-researching with these women was the path I chose, seeing this study as a possibility to collaborate and produce knowledge together. Using collaborative techniques, well-grounded and validated by feminist researchers (Halberstam 1998, Gal & Kligman 2000, Dahl 2010) and anthropologists alike (Holmes & Marcus 2008, Breunlin & Regis 2009; Davis 2013; Simaan 2017), I approached my research as collaborative ethnography.

My extensive, long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Lithuania was conducted in the period between September 2016 and August 2017. I took the field notes of daily encounters with women in Kaunas, including casual, first time conversations and more intensive, long-term collaborative engagements, such as volunteering at the daycare center, co-organizing cultural events in one district of Kaunas together with local artists and community workers. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted in Lithuanian with single mothers living in Kaunas. All interviewees are professionals with higher education in variety of subjects (at least MA degree in arts, social sciences, humanities, education, medical sciences, engineering). All of them were between 25 and 50 years old at the time of the interview and sustaining themselves and their kids financially, being either employed, self-employed (freelancers) or currently on maternity leave. Conversations with other single mothers as well as field observations were recorded in field notes during or immediately after they took place. I kept recording reflective notes for myself, while being immersed in the field work. After my return to Sweden, the interviews and notes were transcribed, translated and analysed. Following the ethics of decolonial research I shared the tentative themes and some written texts with my co-researchers via ongoing e-communication that followed. Some useful feedback and additional insights from my research participants helped me to increase the accuracy and make sure their stories and practices of everyday life were well represented in this article.

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

Theoretical Framework: Precarity and Reproductive Labour

Starting from the Wife in a Nuclear Family

The phenomena of nearly universalized Western understanding of “marriage” and “family” has been widely examined and criticized by philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and feminists alike, with varying analytical approaches (Pateman 1988; Federici 2004; Graeber 2011). Despite the romantic negotiations of marriage as “free” agreement between autonomous partners who willingly commit to the relationship, the economic order built in gender subordination has not been erased (Kováts 2015).

Within the tradition of cultural anthropology, Gayle Rubin’s (1975) theorizing of “sex/gender system” sees “wife” as one of the necessities of a worker in a capitalist system. Rubin argues that “since no wage is paid for housework, the labour of women in the home contributes to the ultimate quantity of surplus value realized by the capitalist,” thus, women’s oppression and domestication was not accidental in any way, but rather a crucial element in the development of capitalism. (ibid: 163–4).

Furthermore, according to Mies (1986), the processes of colonization and housewifization were closely and causally interlinked. She made a great effort in explaining how the establishment of what she calls “internal colony”, i.e., nuclear family, came about by exploiting (former) colonies and (current) peripheries, that now still constitute the realm of cheap labour force for the profiting centres. To this day, for those living in peripheries, catching up with the core requires gender regimes that can massively use and exhaust women’s human resources, both in private and in public spheres. While being exploited for the gap between the centre and the semiperiphery to be bridged, women are simultaneously pacified by conservative patriarchal ideologies so that their exploitation steadily continues (Blagojević 2009: 41). It is certainly not by accident that a “wife” and a “mother” became the necessities of a worker, that women, not men, do all the care and house-work, which is still seen as “natural” to them, something they just do.

Defining Reproductive Labour: Between Love and Money

If we agree that capitalism is by definition a set of social relations that is used to produce capital by extracting a surplus value from things, money and people, then we can see a realm of domestic work, an unpaid women’s labour, as one of the primary mechanisms that get capitalism going. “Food must be

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11 According to David Graeber (2011), “as proponents of “family values” might be interested to know, *familia* itself ultimately derives from the word *famulus*, meaning “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: 201).
cooked, clothes cleaned, beds made, wood chopped, etc. Housework is therefore a key element in the process of the reproduction of the labourer from whom surplus value is taken.” (Rubin 1975: 162) The reproduction of labour power depends largely upon women’s housework, needed to transform commodities into sustenance for the worker. Given that capitalistic system cannot generate surplus without women, the attempt was made to “degenderize” this work that included not only domestic duties, but also all the affective labour that was “naturally” prescribed to a woman and more importantly – concealed (Federici 2012, 2017; Casas-Cortés 2014).

As Narotzky and Besnier suggest (2014), “[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. […] 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).” (s7) No doubt, the changes in state services and national politics in general are massively affecting the micro politics in the family as well as everyday strategies.

As Bhattacharya (2017) rightly points out, “[b]y 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.” (90) The work of social reproduction has been effectively degraded, while feminization of labor re-instated such servile traits as “flexibility, vulnerability, total availability, high degrees of adaptation, talent for improvisation, and the ability to assume simultaneous roles and tasks (as housewives, wives, mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nurses, teachers, midwives)”, keeping historically assigned women’s tasks and affective labour in place (Casas-Cortés 2014:219). Being a “woman’s work” it is already a lesser, less analytical, less valued, although highly demanded labour that encompasses multiplicity of care activities that in the post-Fordist conditions signify new type of economy still ran by the same precarious labour (Federici 2012; Lorey 2014; Bhattacharya 2017).

Precarity and Governmentality

According to Gill & Pratt (2008), “precariousness, precarity and precarization have recently emerged as novel territory for thinking – and intervening in – labour and life.” (3) The processes of precarization are being discussed by social scientists as increasingly relevant category for understanding new class formations and mechanisms of governmentality. Precarity can be understood as condition of existence without predictability or security, habituation to expecting a life of unstable labour and unstable living not as unlucky, temporary, individualized circumstance, but permanent condition (Standing 2011; Ross 2009). It can be interpreted as a loss of certain social securities and systemic depolitization (Berardi 2007), or broader – as shared vulnerability and interdependence (Butler 2004, 2009; Alonso et all.
2016). The volume of academic work on precarity has been steadily increasing as soon as the phenomena started “spreading” in the Global North.

As majority of such scholarship is focused on labour market and is often gender-blind, such groups as a Madrid-based feminist activist-research collective *Precarias a la deriva*\(^{12}\) challenge any gender-neutral understanding of precarity. For them, the gender question, feminist contributions to economics as well as the multiplicity of experiences and the “radical differences” within precarity must not be erased. (Casas-Cortés 2014: 215). Following the approach of Casas-Cortés (2014), I use the concept of *precarity* mostly as a tool to peek at the intersection of labour, gender and power and analyse the patterns of feminized labour.

As Isabel Lorey (2015) suggests, “the state does not on principle limit freedom or combat insecurity, but both become the ideological precondition for governmental precarization.” (64) By not providing a sufficient assistance for single mothers, by not improving the policies in order to increase the participation of fathers’ in childcare (besides the meager monetary renumeration), by not putting an effort to change the prevailing patriarchal norms in the society, the state contributes to the processes of precarization and social exclusion of less privileged groups.

### Precarious Life of a Single Mother in Contemporary Lithuania

#### Social Stigma Undetectable by Sociological Research

As Lithuanian social scientist Aušra Maslauskaite (2014, 2015) has repeatedly stated, there is no cultural exclusion related to marital status (divorce) in Lithuanian society, where divorce is increasingly accepted, widely spread, and still growing (42.9%). In her scientific articles, she argues that stigmatization of divorced single mothers is not a problem in Lithuania any longer, thus, it is much more important to research the scope of poverty risk and consumption power of single parents (Maslauskaite 2014: 33). While I celebrate any research that brings under-represented groups out of the shadow, my ethnographic fieldwork suggested quite different conclusions regarding the question of stigma.

The mother of four Liucija, 40, has a Master’s degree in sociology and works as a teacher at Waldorf pre-school, one of a few such pre-schools in Kaunas, but the first one established a decade or so ago. Up until now, Liucija is on maternity leave with her forth child and is receiving a few hundred euros financial allowance for the second year.\(^{13}\) Thankfully, her ex-husband is a well established


\(^{13}\) By Lithuanian law, there are three options for parental leave: 1) one year option – before the child reaches on year – guarantees the 100% of the recipient’s compensated wage (after the taxes) for one year; 2) the two-year option is calculated as follows: before a child turns one year old, the amount of the benefit is 70% of the previous salary, and in the second year, before a child turns two – 40% of the recipient’s former earnings. 3) The third option
professional who supports his children financially and contributes to the utility bills. As we drank tea at Liucija’s place – a relatively big house in the suburbs of Kaunas – she was trying to describe her situation after the break-up and name the issues that bother her in daily life.

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 husband dies, everyone mobilizes, everyone helps as much as they can, supporting and comforting. But when your husband walks away – then everyone turns their back on you: It’s your own fault! But what’s the difference? […] The difference is huge […]. If you are divorced, you always feel guilty, you always feel bad in the eyes of the society, as if you did something wrong. […] there’s absolutely no support from the society. I just realized it recently, and it was a painful realization.

(Interview with Liucija, March 2017)

I knew Liucija from before, and I remember very well that since her divorce a few years earlier Liucija had internalized the guilt and personal responsibility for broken relationship so strongly that she went on and on to “confess” what things she did wrong in the family, how her priorities were incorrect and how she wished that she could fix it after she understood her mistakes. The mistakes, she insisted, were many, from not taking care of herself enough as a woman and drowning fully in never-ending household duties, to not providing her husband with worthy enough partner for intellectual conversations and sometimes disregarding his needs. While her feelings of guilt have moved a little bit out of the centre, her overall experience and feelings of exclusion did not change that much over a couple of years. In every conversation with Liucija, I recorded the longing for societal acceptance as well as the absence of support. Any kind of friendly contact and assistance was desired fiercely while lacking scarcely.

She said that her circle of friends had shrunk incredibly – almost none of the former family friends stayed around. Now she was attempting to make new encounters, build new relationships, but having four children it was not easy time- and energy-wise. Liucija confided that now it was easier to adjoin to similar ones – marginalized and rejected by the society: single mothers or some “alternative” people. “I feel totally rejected, written off, left alone. Every day I feel as if I’m carrying the label attached to my forehead – it’s your own fault!”, she said.

In every single of my interviews such stigmatization was central. Precarious subjectivity was reinforced by weakening links with old friends, dissolving networks of support, blaming and shaming from the side of relatives. As a study of Marina Blagojević (2012) rightly observes, in societies where family remains the primary unit of economic stability and basis for social recognition, “single parents, and particularly single mothers, are facing some additional restrictions: stigmatisation, limitations of their social space and communication, social rejection and strong patriarchal control” (224).

includes possibility to abstain from working until the child is three years old, however, no compensation is possible during the third year.
The fact that single mothers in Lithuania are mostly discussed in terms of social exclusion, poverty, mental issues and welfare aid, made me think what does it mean for these women to be not only stigmatized, as their experiences actually reveal, but also to be shovelled into the bin of “societal burden”, recognizable as “unfit”, “unlucky” other, a “failure”. The flow of my research proved that such labels are taking toll of women's vulnerability, pushing them back to the vague safety of their privacy – to the expert role of a caretaker.

Who Has to Take care?

As Lithuanian researcher Dalia Marcinkevičienė (2008) pointed out, the childcare provision in Lithuania was never great in Soviet times, and became even worse after the independence. According to the recent EU study conducted in 2014, Lithuania had less than 20% of children under age of three being taken care of by public arrangements and one of the smallest percentage of children between age 3 and mandatory school age (around 60%) among other EU countries. (7) As this quantitative study illustrated, and my qualitative research confirmed, Lithuanian mothers tend to rely heavily upon the unpaid care work of their own and their mothers, rather than the fathers of children or the state, as is the case in the Nordic countries.

This has been the case for another single mother in her 20s, medical professional Ūla, who has been sustaining her family from a minimal maternity allowance, spread out in two years of maternity leave. The father of her child was unemployed and even more precarious, however, at first, Ūla was reluctant to share her sorrows refusing to adapt a victimized position of a single mother. She said she was doing just fine, just as before, and that little has changed in her life after her child's arrival. However, as I learned much later, in fact, almost everything changed. Her daily routines became dependent on her baby's cycle, while all the care work had to be managed on her own together with increased precarity. Having a profession that is of high demand did not help her to deal with financial and emotional hardships.

The most important thing for me was to make it clear who has to do what in the family, not by some definition, but by agreement between us. And to understand that his contribution to the family life must be both, financial and in terms of labour [...]. So for me it was really difficult emotionally, and then also really stressed financially. [...] It was very difficult, and I was really angry because giving a share to his needs I had to “steal” from my daughter. She could have had something more, something better... This was really a terribly difficult situation both, financially and emotionally.

(Ūla, August 2017)

As the couple couldn't resolve the issues of shared duties and financial responsibilities, they decided to separate. Since that day, Ūla says, it became much

14 Use of childcare services in the EU Member States and progress towards the Barcelona targets http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/140502_gender_equality_workforce_ssr1_en.pdf
easier for her. In her words, “it felt like having two small babies, each of whom required equal care and attention. It was really hard”, she confides. It resonates highly with Utrata’s (2015) accounts from her fieldwork in “new”, post-soviet Russia, where single mothers would often complain about husbands being as “second children” and “standing in the way”. (45) She moved back to her parents’ house, where she got a free housing and some additional help from her mother.

As we known from the second-wave autonomous and Marxist feminist movements, in addition to housework and domesticated sex work, attachment and closeness in the family does not come “naturally” either. It is always some people who must do that affective, emotional, caring labour to build the intimacy and relationship. The emotional work that women perform without any acknowledgment or enumeration – taking responsibility, shouldering anxiety, smoothing out tensions and providing validation – is part of the broader realm of reproductive labour. “A fundamental problem is that care work is not valued as work, for it is seen as work that women provide because ethically they cannot but care.” (Skeggs 2014: 12)

The Centrality of Governmentality and Neoliberal Push

Several studies in of single mothers have suggested that evaluation of financial and material wellbeing is rather subjective and that social class, based largely on education, social status accumulated by social class origin and the family’s of origin social network, as well as possibilities to capitalize it, basically defines women’s financial resources, material wellbeing and possible economic social exclusion. (Maslauskaitė 2014: 33) However, in times of growing flexibilization of work and more fluid class boundaries it becomes less clear what class one belongs to and what class entitlements could one still expect. As shown in numerous research on precarity and neoliberal hegemony, neither the class of one’s family of origin, nor the level of education does not any longer guarantee any security on the job market (Standing 2011; Lorey 2015; Casas-Cortés 2014; Maslauskaitė 2017). What still does, in neoliberal terms, is self-improving techniques, self-investment and competitiveness.

As my research participant Liucija suggested in a casual conversation, you have to stand up and go despite everything, if not for yourself – then for your children. You must reach out to new people, establish new connections, find new networks, re-evaluate things and old friends, rearrange priorities and reclaim yourself anew. Two points are of primary importance here: Foucauldian governmentality and a necessary self-sacrifice. According to Blagojević (2012), it is certainly expected from (single) mothers “to sacrifice for their children endlessly, otherwise they lose respect and their position both in the community and in relation to their own children.” (224)

An interesting idea was proposed by Jane Juffer (2006) who talks about the category of “single mother” emerging as “a respected identity group in the context of the neoliberal production of the self-regulating citizen-consumer-subject” (4). Calling this group “domestic intellectuals”, Juffer (2006) illustrates how single motherhood can be seen as intentional, powerful and possibly subversive, choice-
ridden and not at all oppressive identity. While I reject happily the victimization of single mothers, I retain my doubts about the supposed subversion of this new category, which seems to applause (again!) the domesticity “by choice” and individual, strongly neoliberal, individualism and meritocracy.

From what I examined in my field, this kind of stigmatization refers not only to social mocking, but is a rather complex bundle of internalized gender inferiority, hegemonic understanding of “mother’s” and “woman’s” roles, presupposed lack of agency as an “active” citizen and perhaps more importantly – as an active consumer. In neoliberal times, we are repeatedly told to take care of ourselves and to invest in ourselves, in order to be able to compete in the market – whether in terms of paid labour or new intimate relationship. The inability to take care of oneself in neoliberal terms – to re-train, straighten up, look good, be fit, feel happy and claim responsibility for all of the above – seems to be one of the forces pushing many single mothers to isolation and (self-)exclusion.

The Glimpses of Everyday Resistance

Starting to See the Invisible

What seems to be vividly present in all the narratives of single mothers is a constant reiteration of effort, fault, guilt and sacrifice. Indeed, it has been repeatedly shown in feminist research that questioning one’s value and worth is highly skewed in terms of gender, i.e., much more pronounced in women than in men, partially, due to the long-lasting devaluation and depreciation of the former group and its undervalued work. When talking about our everyday life experiences as well as more abstract concerns of close relationships, this is what needs not to be overlooked: the amount of violence experienced in the unequal power relationships.

By starting to reflect and acknowledge all the work that she – as a woman, as a mother of four children, as a care-taker of household, as a precarious woman barely making her ends meet due to lack of support – was performing, Liucija got a sense of unfair treatment, while her emotions started switching from self-blaming to rage and anger about gendered inequalities:

But wait, I actually was a devoted mother to my family […]. I truly did everything with a lot of effort… Well, ok, I didn’t go to beauty salons and I didn’t look like from the cover of magazine. But common, I had three small children and I tried as hard as I could, as I knew how. […] Now I realize that my husband could have taken a part in solving the problems, […] instead of always blaming me for not doing something. It’s very hard to think about this. Only this year [3.5 years passed from their divorce] I relaxed a bit from that guilt.

(Interview with Liucija, March 2017)

Putting the care work that she has been doing all along into the centre and re-evaluating it in terms of extensive unappreciated labour, finally provides
Liucija with some peace and a new lens to examine her family life of the past and the present. While always iterating not only how much is she working as a mother, but also, how unnoticeable and undervalued this work is, we reached an agreement, that the issue needs to be brought into the daylight and once again politically employed. Though she would still not subscribe to any “feminist” agenda that I in a sense represented, I felt like it was a tiny achievement in the knowledge production process that is part of my research.

Then one day Liucija, told me: “To hell with all that strength! I don’t want to be strong any more, if I have to do everything myself – to work, to clean, to bring kids to school, to fix the car, to take care of everything – just on my own. To hell with that strength, if I can’t stand on my feet at the end of the day... What is it for?” At first, I read it as a despair, tiredness and loneliness, feeling deeply empathetic and respectful to her anger. I knew she was strong, extremely capable, and didn’t see the point of denying it. But then another woman Gabija, a single mother of one in her 30s with a Master’s degree in law, helped me to understand and to problematize the celebration strength attached to single mothers.

I finally understood, that only those women who actually have a choice speak about “being strong”. Only she who can choose to be strong or weak can praise it as a virtue. Because she has someone besides her. But when you are cornered just like this, when you have no other choice, then this strength... [...] is not something commendable, something you could be proud of. [...] Because I see how much I pay for that. It takes away happiness, a kind of self-satisfaction, because [you are] on your own. [...] Damn it! I don’t want to be a strong single mother.

(Interview with Gabija, January 2017)

Talking to single mothers, I repeatedly heard that they dislike the label of “strong” and see it as something dropped down on them by others. As if it was used as an excuse for not helping and leaving them struggling on their own. The lack of care and assistance especially from the closest people surfaced in most conversations. Arguably, the women not only despised the role of a “mother-heroine”, ready to travel extensive lengths for their children, but also expressed their unwillingness to carry the double burden as their own mothers were forced to. The image of a single mother as someone incredibly strong and omnipotent, dragging behind the fable of noble self-sacrifice, was fiercely rejected.

To be called or calling oneself strong, however, is a two-sided coin. Another detail of importance here is the lack of choice itself. In my understanding, women want to get rid not (only) of the precise sticker of strong, but of the situation where they have no possibility to choose otherwise. The problem is that the basic promise of a decent life – having a profession, housing, financial stability, mobility – was never kept. In addition to that, the choices of lifestyle, democratic participation, free sexual identity met considerable friction and arguably were limited to very particular choices mostly related to capitalist consumption. In the spirit of governmentality, where all the choices are portrayed to be equally achievable with the right self-investment, it is hard to imagine the alternatives
and a way out of precarity. However, even simple practices of critical distance, self-care and instances of recognizing and rejecting imposed hegemonic values should be seen as significant.

Refusing a Propper Self-Management

Virginija is an educated art teacher and therapist in her late 30s. She’s been married twice and has three children – one teenage daughter with the first husband and two little ones under the school age with the second. Eventually, she divorced them both, but kept in touch regarding the childcare. Her story is a story of many Lithuanian women: divorced, precarious, running around without stopping and taking a break. When telling me about her accident and strained foot, she laughed: “It’s good that it happened, because it made me pause and relax. Otherwise, I would be still running like crazy and something much worse could have occurred.”

When I came to Virginija’s home for the interview, she was alone. She said she brought her kids “forcefully” to their fathers and that she was going to take a slow day, just to relax and heal. Trying to determine how long we were talking, I started looking at the walls searching for a clock. Upon noticing it, Virginija told me, “If you are looking for a clock – we have none.” “Not a single one?”, I insisted. “Not a single one”, she confirmed. “Clocks are very restrictive and I don’t want to be ruled by them.”

She was right. The way we use various measures to control ourselves in terms of time and productivity, can be definitely seen as one of the mechanisms of governmentality on which governmental precarization runs. The concept of time and its “invention” by colonialism as we know it now has been broadly discussed by decolonial thinkers, pointing at both, the enforcement of 24/7 time measuring nearly universally and refusal to live according to it (Mignolo 2011; Tlostanova 2012). When the linear Eurocentric notion of time was brought upon peoples and instrumentalized for increasing their productivity, the working shift of women and especially mothers have multiplied, including productive and reproductive labour.

The importance of time and its measuring has not diminished, perhaps even increased, in times of widespread precarious living conditions. Zero-hour contracts, occasional freelancing, 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” – spent unproductively. Therefore, while it may not be the way to reject this capitalist system and neoliberal planning, it can serve as a way to retain sanity, dignity and critical approach to oppressive hegemonic regimes.

By Way of Conclusion

Shaken up by quite pessimistic statistics and depressive social trends, I engaged in the ethnographic project that seeks to uncover, putting it simply, how people who (have no other choice than to) stay in Lithuania handle their everyday
living. I looked at the disparity between the internalized life expectations of highly educated women in Lithuania and their precarious realities, which they don’t feel to deserve with the amount of work they have invested in themselves. The boundaries of class position proved to be increasingly fluid, providing none of the securities that were expected.

Looking through the lens of single motherhood, the scope and intensity of reproductive work became clearly noticeable and hopefully added to the discussion of gender politics in Lithuania. One of the attempts of this article is precisely to illustrate with ethnographic data how the sphere of reproductive labour, although indispensable, is highly undervalued and made invisible. The analysis of Lithuanian context helps to reveal how governmental precarization is part of this process. Once the emphasis is put on the invisible and unpaid care work, provided almost exclusively by women, the practices of self-care can emerge as counter-hegemonic instances with some potential for a change. If employed individually, by the rules of neoliberal governance, such practices are risky – likely to intensify precarity and exclusion. However, by (intentionally) moving away from capitalizable, efficiency driven, neoliberal logic infused governmentality of self-improvement towards questioning the normality, customs and unjust allocation of care work in terms of gender and class, brings women one step closer to realizing their potential to challenge the system that runs on their unpaid labour.

As the paper has also demonstrated, the survival strategies employed by research participants seem to be both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic, informed by neoliberal schooling and shaped by more decolonial wish for everyday resistance. Evidently, it is never one or the other, but rather interconnected, fluctuating, changing in time and space. It is more about instances and daily negotiations, and the meaning that we ascribe to such mundane, seemingly obvious aspects of life. It is also about the voices of women that help to understand the moments of micro-resistance in somewhat particular, but not idiosyncratic semi-peripheral context.

Taking recent capitalist reorganization of work, less rigid definition of class in the times of precarity, immaterial labour and global economy and ongoing transformations of gender norms into account, such research would need to be continued with a broader scope and deeper theoretical discussions. While this ethnographic study was not aiming at representability, it rather took a challenge to engage collaboratively and contribute to development of feminist inquiry and decolonial methodological approach in social research in Lithuania.

**Literature**


