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# Single mothers` worries

Phenomenological approach to mothers` worries

and parental support in Finland

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II

Abstract

Single mother families need special attention from the society. This study is interested in how the society takes into consideration single mothers` worries. The goal of the study is to answer to the following questions: How do single mothers experience motherhood? What kinds of worries do single mothers experience as mothers? What kind of experiences do single mothers have of getting parental support in the areas of their worries?

In this study, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is used. The study describes and interprets the single mothers` experienced worries and explains how the mothers understand motherhood and parental support from their perspective. The mini focus group interviews were conducted in November 2019 in an organization which organizes family work particularly for single mothers in Finland. The purpose of the mini focus group is to understand participants` perspectives. The data was then analyzed and arranged into themes according to the phenomenological principals.

The interviewed Finnish mothers see motherhood as a gift which gives meaning to their life. This study shows that they worry about having all responsibility alone, their financial situation, their own well-being, their children growing without a father and their family model being different from nuclear families. Mothers experience that family policy supports them in their financial situation and in their own well-being. The peer support from other single mothers eases their feeling of isolation. Family workers support mothers in practical ways. Confidential, informal and long-term relationships with the family workers are appreciated. Grandparents give mothers social support, but their ability and willingness to help mothers varies a lot. The results of this study show that the society needs to make sure that all parents get social support, all family models are treated equally and single mothers can attend working life.

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Sammendrag

Alenemødres bekymringer

Fenomenologisk tilnærming til mødres bekymringer og foreldrestøtte i Finland

Alenemødres familier trenger ekstra oppmerksomhet fra samfunnet. Denne studien fokuserer på hvordan samfunnet håndterer alenemødres bekymringer. Målet med denne studien er å svare på følgende spørsmål: Hvordan oppleves det å være mor for alenemødre? Hvilke bekymringer opplever alenemødre i rollen som mor? Hvilke erfaringer opplever alenemødre i å få foreldrestøtte til områdene som gir bekymringer?

Studien tar utgangspunkt i en hermeneutisk fenomenologisk posisjon. Studien beskriver og tolker alenemødres bekymringer og forklarer hvordan mødrene forstår det å være mor og foreldrestøtten fra deres perspektiv. Fokusgruppeintervjuene ble gjennomført i november 2019, med deltakere fra en organisasjon som driver en åpen barnehage og gruppeaktiviteter for alenemødre i Finland. Målsetningen med fokusgruppeintervjuene er å forstå deltakernes perspektiv. Studien benytter tematisk analyse etter fenomenologiske prinsipper.

De finske mødrene som er blitt intervjuet ser på det å være mor som en gave som gir dem en mening med livet. Studien viser at de bekymrer seg over: å bære ansvaret alene, sin økonomiske situasjon, sitt eget velbefinnende, at barna vokser opp uten en far og at deres familiemodel er annerledes enn kjerne familiene. Alenemødrene opplever familie politikken som støttende til sin økonomiske situasjon og til sitt eget velbefinnende. Gruppestøtten fra andre alenemødre lindrer på følelsen av å være isolert. Hjelpetiltak i familien støtter mødrene mest praktisk. Konfidensielle, vennlige og langvarige relasjoner med en profesjonell familierådgiver blir verdsatt. Besteforeldre gir alenemødrene sosial støtte, men forutsetningene og villighet til å hjelpe varierer mye. Resultatene av denne studien viser at samfunnet må sørge for at alle foreldre får sosial støtte, at alle familie modeller blir behandlet likeverdig og at alenemødre må kunne delta i arbeidslivet.

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# 1. Introduction

Why should society be interested in single mothers` worries? Why am I, a student of social work, interested in their worries? Firstly, I am of the opinion that it is a question of human rights. Convention on the Rights of a Child states that "state parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents in the performance of their childrearing responsibilities". (Convention on the Rights of a Child 1989) A good assistant needs to be interested in single mothers` worldview and identity, including the worries that they face as mothers and how they experience getting support from the society today. If we take care of mothers and their worries, we also take care of their children that are the future of the country.

Secondly, I would say that it is an ethical question. According to Social workers` ethic principals "clients` interests are primary". (National Association of Social Workers 2017) It is not obvious that when a single mother meets social workers, her worries are heard. Very often social work is done from the point of professionals` and society`s worries. Social workers have power to define worries. (Uggerhøj 2014, p. 211) As a student I want to hear my future clients voice. I hope that hearing their voice will help me to work for their best and represent their voice in my future work. Personally, I am also motivated by Christian ethics. Bible encourages to "seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow". (Bible, Isaiah 1:17)

The philosophical hermeneutic phenomenological approach works together with the purpose of the study. Phenomenology aims to describe the experiences of a phenomenon. My goal is to make the experienced worries of single mothers known and heard. Phenomenology can be a way to study the lifeworld of the clients so that the society gets in contact with the mothers` worries, from their own perspective. My goal is to listen to and write down Finnish single mothers` worries and then with empathy and through theory interpret them. (Houston 2014, p. 94) The goal is to answer to the following questions: How do single mothers experience motherhood? What kind of worries do single mothers experience as mothers? And what kind of experiences do they have about parental support in the areas of their worries? The mini focus group interviews work together with phenomenology since their focus is on talking about concrete personal experiences and on hearing participants perspectives. (Bryman 2016, p. 502) Interviews were

conducted in November 2019 in an organization that organizes family work to single parent families.

In chapter 2 of this thesis I will present how gender, familism, feminism and class shape motherhood in the Finnish society. It is these expectations and norms that can cause single mothers to worry. Chapter 3 presents how the society tries to meet the needs of single mothers and support them in their motherhood through family policy and family work. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach of this study and the context of the interviews are explained in chapter 4. Also, data analysis and ethical considerations are explained. Chapters 5 and 6 include the results of data analysis. Chapter 5 concentrates on worries that the interviewees experience and chapter 6 explain how the interviewees experience that the society supports them in managing their worries. In chapter 7 I will present the conclusion of the results and discuss them in the light of theory.

I am very thankful to all the single mothers that I had an honor to interview. I also want to thank Kaisa Koponen for arranging the interviews. I want to thank all teachers at Oslo Metropolitan University for good teaching and especially Erika Gubrium for inspiration for the topic and for finding me a supervisor in Finland. I want to thank Katja Repo for good supervision and giving me a Finnish perspective on things. I want to thank Hanna Rantanen, Ashleigh Mättö and Sayed Tenkanen for proofreading. Last, but not least, I want to thank my husband Dag and my children Heidi Rebekka, Benjamin and Samuel for support in this process.

**2. Motherhood, single motherhood and ideology**

In this chapter I will present some frames that shape the experience of motherhood and single motherhood in the Finnish context. How do gender, familism, feminism and class shape and explain motherhood in the Finnish society? The worries that single mothers have, are also often caused by the surrounding world, ideologies, politics and culture. It is the surrounding world that puts expectations on mothers about their role, parenting style and family model, which can worry single mothers.

**2.1. Frames of motherhood**

Motherhood can be viewed as biological, as a natural outcome of reproduction and regeneration. But it can also be seen as a social status and institution that e.g. culture, families, religion and politics shape. As a social institution motherhood contains certain rights, responsibilities and expectations regarding the care and nurture of children. (Alwin 2004, p. 142, Krok, 2009, p. 72-74, Faircloth 2014, p.33) In this chapter I will describe what kinds of frames gender, class, familism and feminism place for the experience of motherhood in the Finnish context.

**2.1.1. Gender**

Parenthood is not gender free. What it means to be a mother versus what it means to be a father are generally quite different things. (Alwin 2004, p. 142) Mothers are expected to take more parental responsibilities than fathers. Mothers` parenting style is thought to be different from that of the fathers`. Mothers have also been given the responsibility of helping fathers to take their role as fathers. (Gabb 2011, p.47)

Studies of parenthood have concentrated on women, their role and responsibilities. Until the 1960s, parenting and children were connected only to women. (Vuori 2001, p. 30) It is not until the last decades that focus has shifted to fathers` role. (Gabb 2011, p. 47, Vuori 2003, p.55) Especially in the 1940s and 1950s, psychologists` theories related parenthood strictly on women. At the same time knowledge about parenting became valued.

Sigmund Freud, John Bowlby and Talcot Parsons have had a great influence on parenting and still do. Their theories emphasize mothers` role as the only parent that a small child can attach to. (Vuori 2001, p.21) Psychologist John Bowlby`s attachment theory`s fundamental thought is that "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mothersubstitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment". (Blakely & Dziadosz, 2015, p. 284) Mother has a biological desire and ability for a symbiotic relationship with a child. If the attachment style is secure, the child will develop well. On the other hand, if the attachment style is ambivalent or avoidant, the child can get mental problems and possible transfer the problems to the next generation. Bowlby based his theory on children who were physically taken care of but had mental problems because of their separation from their biological mother. (Vuori, 2003, p. 5) Father`s role was to support his family economically and support his wife in her motherhood. (Mattila, 2019, p.7) It was not before the beginning of the 21$^{st}$ century that the child was thought to be able to be attach both to his mother and father. (Jallinoja 2006, p. 117)

In the 1990s, the Western World started to talk about intensive parenthood and that also lifted mother into the center as a caregiver. Sharon Hays describes mothers as "super moms". It is child centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive parenthood. A priceless child must be recognized, and a mother needs to respond to all of the child`s needs and desires according to the child`s emotional and intellectual development. The child is much more precious than mother`s paid work. The ideal mother now both works intensively and spends quality time with her children. (Hays, 1996, p.8-10,132,151) Children are seen to be more vulnerable to risks impacting their physical and emotional development than earlier and parents are understood as policymakers and parenting experts who have a deterministic impact on child`s development and future. This parenting style has also become a part of adults, particularly mothers`, identity. (Faircloth, 2014, p. 26)

In the 21st century, women share a greater measure of financial responsibility in families whereas men have taken more responsibility of domestic work. (Alwin 2004, p. 143, 145) However, there is still a high level of agreement that mothers with children should reduce their labour force involvement by staying at home or working part-time. (Wall 2007, p. 87-88) The Nordic countries are known as spokesmen for the worker-carer idealism, but in practice it is

regarded as a women`s responsibility only. In Norway, mothers work part-time and in lower positions so that they get to spend more time with their children. (Halrynjo & Lang 2009, p.37, Duvander & Ellingsæter, 2016, p. 83) In Finland it is often women that take care of small children at home. (Duvander & Ellinsæter 2016, p. 83) Also, much of the invisible mental labour including planning and scheduling falls on mothers. (Faircloth 2014, p. 32)

Motherhood demands parenthood, whereas social and cultural environment don`t require the same from fathers. Father`s role is dependent on his readiness to become a dad, the stability of partnership and his financial situation. (Sinkkonen 2003, p. 262) It is fathers' personal choice if they want to commit to their child. Professionals also communicate mostly with mothers. The experts stress easily that men shouldn`t be forced to take more responsibility of domestic work and child-rearing, but that it is mothers` responsibility, together with the professionals, to kindly and imperceptibly persuade men to take responsibility. This means that equal sharing of parental responsibilities becomes a mother`s worry as well. (Vuori 2003, p.55,57)

Lastly, single parents are mostly women. In 2014 in Finland 18% of all families with children consisted of a mother and children, whereas only 0.1% of families consisted of a father and children. (The family federation of Finland) This cannot be a co-incidence, but rather a cultural expectation that mothers live in the same address with their children.

In the coming chapters I will present familism and feminism that give two different pictures of motherhood. In Finland it is particularly mothers who choose either full time working or full time parenting during the years of having small children. (Repo, 2010, p.196)


### 2.1.2. Familism

Familism is an understanding of motherhood and family that has had a lot of influence in Finnish history. Familism is based on the organic view of the family. It sees family as a harmonic and unified unit. Family is seen as a central building block of the society. Familism includes a thought that anything that is good for the family is good for the society. Investing in families ensures happy citizens and a good society. There is no separation of the roles as partner, spouse and parent. Both children and women disappear, because they are in the shadow of the husband

and father. (Skevik, 2003, p.424-425) A mother`s role is to take care of the wellbeing of the family. (Vuori 2001, p. 21, Mattila 2019, p. 4)

In the patriarchal family fatherhood was public and fathers represented the family. They had the responsibility of the family. Mothers were almost invisible, and they were seen rather as child birthers than parents. (Forsberg, 1998, p. 23) Women worked e.g. in fields and took care of households. The idea of a healthy adult woman devoting herself solely to child-care was unknown. (Hiilamo, 2002, p. 58) It was also impossible to separate a woman from a mother. Physical health, hygiene and diligence were important values concerning the upbringing of children. (Nätkin 1997)

In the 1940s, the attachment theory raised the psychological focus. The cultural picture of the nuclear family included a mother who took care of home, children and father. (Vuori 2003, p. 40-45) The nuclear family was seen as the best family model and the peak of the family development. (Mattila, 2019, p.7)

Housewife institution was very strong in the 1950s, especially in the United States and the Central Europe. It was not that popular in Finland and during the Second World War the number of women working outside home grew and many of them continued even though the war ended. (Mattila, 2019, p.9) Female labor participation was up to 52% in Finland in 1952. (Hiilamo, 2002, p. 74) But the understanding of women staying at home after giving birth stayed strong until the 1970s. Also, until the end of the 1970s it was taken granted that marriage meant getting children. (Mattila, 2019, p.17)

From the 1970s Finland has been divided into the conservatives that represent familism and working mothers that represent feminism. Housewives have felt lack of respect. (Mattila, 2019, p. 17) A daycare law in 1985 included cash-for-care benefit and gave public respect for home care. This law emphasized a freedom of choice between daycare and home care. (Mattila, 2019, p.10,17) In the 1980s and 1990s cash-for-care was popular, especially during the economic depression in the 1990s. Home care for children under three-year-old became a new model for good motherhood. (Mattila 2019, p. 18)

In the late 1990s, new familism was born. The new idealism stresses family friendliness. Parents, mainly women, value time with family more than work life. Mothers emphasize that it is their own

choice to stay at home with small children. (Repo 2007, p.2012) It has been suggested that intensive parenting is also one reason to practice familistic family roles. When women work longer hours in demanding positions and practice intensive parenting, the result can be tiredness and stress. (Faircloth 2014, p.27; Wall 2007, p.) Cash-for-care has been seen as a possibility of concentrating on one thing, parenting, instead of combining work and parenting. (Mattila 2019, p. 19-20)

The attachment theory claims that mothers find satisfaction and enjoyment in motherhood. (Blakely & Dziadosz, 2015, p. 284) Intensive parenting also presents parenting as ultimately fulfilling for women. (Faircloth, 2014, p. 28) Mothers who stay at home with children explain their choice as an individual decision that gives personal satisfaction. (Repo, 2010, p.207) In familism, motherhood is satisfying and the source of mothers` wellbeing.

However, we could question if all mothers enjoy motherhood as much. We can argue that mothers are different (Vuori 2003, p. 63) and also the child affects how much the mother enjoys motherhood. For example, the sex and the temperament of the child can define how satisfying a mother finds maternal caregiving. In familism, it is almost impossible to separate the roles of mother and woman from each other. Woman`s life, wishes, desires and abilities stay blurred. (Jokinen 1996, p. 12)

### 2.1.3. Feminism

Feminism has challenged the organic view of the family. Feminism sees a nuclear family as a myth. Families come in many different shapes and sizes. Its view of a family is called the individual view of the family. Feminism deconstructs families into individuals and their relationships. It relates to a man, a woman and a child who are linked to each other by legal and biological ties. Parenting is separated from partnering and the traditional two-parent family is not seen as an idealistic family model. (Skevik, 2003, p. 425-426) Feminism stresses the rights of women and mothers` individualistic rights. It is also focused on sharing the parental responsibilities.

In Finland the first women`s movement was established at the end of the 19[th] century, which fought for women`s right to attend universities. This first wave of feminism stressed motherhood

and absolute morality. They had two idealistic pictures of a woman. Women were to choose either the idealistic motherhood or the role of the independent working woman. The independent role of women was thought to fit unmarried women and women with older children. (Jallinoja 1983, p. 64, 79)

Feminists stood for women`s individual rights whereas maternalists (relative feminism) fought for mothers` rights and pursued to improve their status in society, social security and well-being. In the beginning of the 1900s, maternalists saw mothers as the central builders of society. In their thinking a mother and a child were not separated and that is why feminism needed to be combined with the best of the child. (Nätkin, 1997, p.18-26)

The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s. Feminism abandoned maternalism and the idea that a woman needs to choose between motherhood and the role of an independent woman. The new ideal picture of woman was a working mother: a woman who was a mother and an employee at the same time. Marriage was to be based on feelings and economical independency was thought to bring men and women closer to each other. In an equal family model men were to take responsibility of taking care of children and household work. (Jallinoja 1983, p. 161-162)

The second wave of feminism fought for an independent woman. This included the right for abortion and freedom of choice. Motherhood wasn`t in the center of discussion. (Mattila, 2019, p.16) Feminists encouraged women to act against the prevailing norms and not to stay home with children. (Jallinoja, 1983, p.238) They spoke also for the daycare system together with the daycare movement that presented mothers as defective educators. Daycare was said to increase equality among children. Also, many of the mothers were already working and the uncertain care of their children needed a social political solution. The solution was a daycare law in 1973. This was a public recognition for working mothers with little children. The norm of a working mother became normal and accepted. (Mattila 2019, p. 15)

### 2.1.4. Class

Class has a direct impact on experiences of parenting (Faircloth 2014, p. 32) We cannot reach an accurate picture of parenting without considering class in our analysis. (Alwin 2004, p. 146) In

the following paragraphs, I will present differences between working-class and middle-class parenting styles and parental responsibility sharing.

"Good motherhood" has often been seen from the middle-class point of view, which has made working-class mothers marginalized and blamed for social problems. (Gabb 2011, p.49) It seems that the middle-class has adopted new ideologies faster and felt that their duty is to guide working mothers to the right direction. (Nätkin 1997, p.22) The Finnish history has good examples of this. In the beginning of the 1900s, the middle-class viewed mothers as the builders of society. Middle-class mothers considered it as their duty to teach childcare methods and moral to the working-class women, but the working class had different needs. They needed to fight for the right to be mothers and they were worried about poverty and their low living conditions. (Nätkin 1997, p. 36-37, 40)

A few decades later the middle-class mothers demanded working-class mothers to stay home with their children and not work while taking care of their children. In the 1960s, the feministic movement was also a middle-class movement. It was the academics and university students that presented a new ideal picture of a woman who was a mother and an employee at the same time. (Jallinoja 1983, p. 128)

Stone wrote about class differences in child-rearing in 1977. He argued that the middle-class adopted a more child-centered development orientation, but the working-class was less likely to adopt the child-oriented, affectionate and permissive mode. (Alwin 2004, p.146) In 2011, Anette Lareau calls working classes and poor parents` parenting style as "the accomplishment of natural growth". Their children experience long stretches of leisure time, child-initiated play, clear boundaries between adults and children and daily interactions with kin. Their children have more control over their leisure time and more "childlike" lives, but they don`t automatically learn skills that are needed in school and work life. The middle-class style of parenting Lareau calls "concerted cultivation" that is led by knowledge and experts. Parents control their children`s leisure time with organized activities, they discuss and are in a dialog with their children. In concerted cultivation children learn skills that are beneficial in school and work life.  (Lareau 2011, p. 3-5) Les Back`s study argues that working class displays fewer verbal expressions of emotions than middle-class. However, this doesn`t mean that intimacy is not expressed. Intimacy can be expressed e.g. by making favours or spending time with family as well. (Gabb 2011, p.49)

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Parental responsibilities are shared in different ways in different classes. Working-class represents traditionalism in parental responsibilities. Within lower classes women take more responsibility of parenting than men whereas within upper classes the responsibilities are more often shared. (Crompton & Lyonette 2007, p. 121-122) Mothers with higher education return to work earlier whereas mothers with lower education choose to stay home longer with children. Käyhkö studied cleaners and found out that they prefer to build their identity on family and closer relationships rather than their profession that wasn`t highly appreciated. (Käyhkö. 2006, p.184) Middle-class women are also more likely to be able to afford paid domestic help. (Crompton & Lyonette 2007, p. 121-122)

## 2.2. Single motherhood

Single mothers` motherhood is affected by ideologies, culture and class, just as every mother`s motherhood. Single mothers` position in the society and the fact that they bear responsibility for their children alone can cause them certain disadvantages that need to be discussed as well. Studies in single parenting have for a long time been mainly concentrating on how to combine work and family life, poverty discourse and the well-being of children in broken families. Vanessa May claims that the Finnish research on single parenthood is known for the absence of social problems and social threat approach. (May 2001, p. 54) I will focus on describing single motherhood in the Finnish society today and the economic disadvantage of single mothers.

### 2.2.1. Mothering alone

Single mothers and their children have been a marginalized group for a very long time. Before the Second World War a poor illegitimate child had no possibilities to survive. (Nätkin 2003, p.31) Children that were born outside of marriage didn`t have the right to inherit their father and no-one controlled the father`s maintenance liability. Fatherlessness meant a lack of social security and often single mothers gave their children away. (Forsberg, 1998, p. 23-27) After the Second World War, single parent families became more common. (Nätkin 1997, p. 108) After the 1960s, their position in the society has changed radically, especially because of changes in

moral and norms: what earlier was immoral and a social problem, is now defined as different with respect to other families. (Nätkin 2003, p. 32)

Even though the position of single families is better today, that form of a family is still seen as an exception to the norm that nuclear family represents. Single parents are also expected to prove that they are good parents. (Roivainen, Nylund, Korkiamäki & Raitakari, 2008, p. 14, 132) They must work much harder than other mothers to reach the requirement of a good mother. (Krok, 2009, p. 71) A single parent family is stigmatized for potential problems in child`s normal and good development. (Krok 2009, p. 89-94) If a single parent`s child has challenges, it is easily interpreted to be caused by having only one parent. (Nätkin 2003)

Single mothers can succeed as mothers and their children can become responsible adults. (Nätkin 2003, p.31-32) The attachment theory could be used to defend single mother families: a child only needs one parent to attach to. But since the father`s role is nowadays also emphasized, single motherhood needs an explanation. Why to have a child alone? Why to have a different family model? A study shows that widowed single mothers get acceptance from others, mothers that were left by the fathers get less acceptance and mothers that decide to have a child alone get least acceptance from others. (Hakovirta 2007)

In Krok`s study some mothers said that the most difficult thing in single motherhood is not to not have another adult with whom you can share the everyday life happenings, joys and sorrows with. Krok calls single mothers that wish to have a nuclear family "lonely mothers". (Krok 2009, p.100-104) These mothers can be seen as victims of circumstances and left by the fathers. During the last decades, it has become more common to be a single mother by your own choice. These "independent mothers" have made a conscious decision to have a child. (May 2001, p. 36) For some of them the nuclear family represents a place to practice patriarchal power and they can have abnormal experiences of the nuclear family. (Krok 2009, p. 101-104)

May has studied the coping strategies of Finnish single mothers and she describes well how differently mothers handle their situation in which they have responsibility of their children alone. Some mothers tell a narrative about hardships and the world being against them. Either the woman is strong and works hard or experiences a downfall and remains isolated from the world. These narratives include fate and tragedies, e.g. family members being against the mother and the society hindering a happy life from them. Other narratives include optimism and

independence. These stories stress the mother`s own possibility for change and better life or how the mother distances herself from the society and finds meaning in an alternative lifestyle. The mother`s strength and determination are emphasized. (May 2001, p. 101-104) Whereas some mothers feel totally exhausted by their responsibilities, other mothers find new purpose and meaning for life.

To have responsibility of a family alone can be tiring. Loneliness and lacking support are reasons for mothers` tiredness. (Jokinen 1996) More likely than cohabiting mothers, single mothers have been proven to experience more likely stressful life events, episodic and chronic depression, anxiety, substance abuse, low self-esteem, social isolation, and lack of emotional support. These stress factors can impact mothers` current mood, availability and energy level, which can cause negative parenting practices like controlling and rejecting behaviours. (Daryanami, Hamilton, Abramson & Alloy 2016, p. 1412,1418)

Finnish single parents have been proven to have more health issues and challenges with well-being compared to other parents. In a questionnaire in 2013, single parents reported their quality of life lower than other parents and being less happy during the last four weeks than other parents. 16% of single parents experienced being significantly mentally burdened. 10% of nuclear families` parents felt the same. (Kaikkonen, Mäki, Murto, Pentala, Hakulinen-Viitanen & Laatikainen 2014, p. 163)


### 2.2.2. Economic disadvantage

In Finland, single mother families are the main group living at the risk of poverty. During the last two decades, poverty has increased especially among single mother families. In 2012, 32% of the children living at the risk of poverty came from single parent families. (Salmi, Lammi-Taskula & Sauli 2014, p. 87) The financial situation of single fathers is considerably better than that of single mothers. (Salmi et al. 2014, p. 94) Parent`s young age, low education and unemployment are other minor factors that explain families` low income level. (Salmi & al. 2014. p. 96)

Single parents have potential to earn half of what two-parent families earn. Also, in Finland women earn on an average 80% of men`s salary. It is not easy to combine work and taking care of childcare alone. It is also not always profitable to accept a low-paid job offer, because often

income support, child benefit and housing benefit give mothers almost the same amount for living. Also, sole custody creates limits for what type of jobs mothers can accept and what kind of working hours they can do. (Pylkkänen 2009, p. 100-101)

Poverty can be measured in many ways and we get different results according to what type of measures we use. In the richest countries of the world it is appropriate to talk about relative poverty, poverty in the sense of falling behind from the average standard of living of the society in which one lives (UNICEF 2007, p.5-6). OECD measures poverty simply by income. The percentage of children that live in a family whose income is lower than 50% of the median disposable income of the country, is at the risk of poverty (OECD Family Database 2018).

Poverty is a subjective experience which often leads to social exclusion. A poor person can be described as one who is excluded from participating normal social activities. It refers to non-participation of the central living conditions or to a lack of social relations. (Halvorsen 2011, 40-41). Gubrium and Pellissery talk about individuals not having the resources and capacities, the "capability," to function in acceptable ways according to the prevailing standards and resources of their local communities. The freedom to function according to such standards is shackled by poverty. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) recognizes this lack of freedom to function as a violation of basic human rights. (Gubrium & Pellissery 2016, p.4-5)

Poverty can be brief, sporadic or long-lasting. The longer it lasts the more harmful it is. (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p.56-57) If a poor person can see a way out of his or her situation and hope for the future, poverty doesn`t cause as many worries as it does without hope. (Krok 2009, p. 122-123) Poverty makes people feel shame in forms of feeling inadequacy and imagining external judgement by others (Gubrium & Pellissery 2016, p.4-5) People living in poverty may distance themselves from others and tend to externalize blame and anger. These coping strategies can eventually lead to further marginalization or social exclusion. (Walker & co 2013, p. 2)

Krok noticed in her study that single mothers didn`t identify themselves as poor. Yet, low-income limited their freedom of choice and decreased their social life. (Krok 2009, p. 118, 140) In 2012 only half of the Finnish single mothers had offered to pay for their children`s hobbies, less than half of them were able to buy or repair domestic appliances and only one third was able to use money a yearly holiday trip. 22% of the Finnish single mothers reported having big

difficulties and 29% of them reported minor difficulties in covering all expenses. 24% of single parents received income support. (Salmi & al. 2014, p. 94,99)

Poor parents don`t offer to buy clothes and items like other parents. (Salmi & al. 2014, p. 91) External help, such as food banks and free school meals, can help families with low income. In a Swedish study, single mothers explained that the worst worries of being a single mother are being worried about the shortage of money and the difficulties to provide children a "normal childhood" with all activities and vacations. Schools and preschools make it worse by arranging activities that cost money. (Roman 2017, p. 30-32) Single mothers see alternative ways, mutual help and saving important. They need to anticipate and plan bigger investments, such as children`s winter clothes, carefully beforehand. Borrowing and buying second-hand clothes is a way to reach out to the standards of motherhood. Mothers need to abstain from things they can`t afford and especially from their personal needs. (Krok 2009, p. 135-137) Yet, saving is not a skill that people living in poverty can utilize automatically. Some mothers are proud of their skills of saving and it gives them joy to find cheap and good products while others do not. (Krok 2009, p. 135)

## 3. Parental support for single mothers

The wellbeing of children and families can be said to be an absolute value in the Finnish society. That is why worries about children's wellbeing brings together professionals, politicians and citizens. Media and institutions discuss parenthood all the time. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p. 20) But society has very few direct ways to solve worries concerning parenthood in terms of directing families. Society acts often according to their own worries and it does not guarantee that they are the same as mothers` worries. Society can use family politics in anticipating and in preventing injurious effects through risk management. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p.19) Society can also try to recognize worries in an early stage and support parenthood through preventive services which include e.g. targeted family work for families and peer support (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 216) In this chapter I will focus on describing how Finnish society tries to meet the needs of single mothers and support them in their motherhood.


### 3.1. Family Policy

Family policy is a range of instruments that governments use to support, influence and regulate behaviours and welfare of families with children. Family policy arises both from the worries of society, but it is also influenced by ideological and normative positions. (Daly, 2015, p.800) Family policy has been used e.g. to solve the worry about the low birthrate, worries caused by demographic change and the worry about children living in poverty and big families. It has also been used to improve gender equality and to help families in combining employment and taking care of children. (Kaufmann 2002, p. 426-428)

The Nordic countries` family policy is based on the individual view of the family. The state has more direct relationship to individuals in the family and the state is committed to treat all parents and children in similar situations equally. (Skevik 2003, p. 436-438) Social justice and equality is stressed. The citizens are understood to be worthy of equal rights, opportunities and access to resources. (Reichhert 2017, p. 13) Children are also seen as subjects that have rights in society. Children have rights here and now. Also, their rights can be based on the idea of social investment for the future. (Sandbæk & Grødem 2009, p. 186). The idea of future investment must include a thought that a child isn`t obligated to pay the investment back for the society.

(Sandbæk & Grødem, 2009, p. 187; Daly, 2005, p. 800) Child-oriented family policy can be considered as a social investment.

The Nordic family policies are considered well-effective in preventing poverty and effective in facing post-industrial change, including taking care of vulnerable families like single-parent families with small children. (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p. 13-14) They tend to support lower poverty rates and fairly compressed income distributions. (Fritzell, Bäckman & Ritakallio, 2011, p. 166) Yet, single mothers and their children are one of the main groups living at the risk of poverty in Europe.  Fritzell & al. claim in their comparative study that even though Nordic countries have lower rate of poverty, for single parents the Nordic countries are not any better than other European countries. (Fritzell & al., 2011, p. 177)

Before the Second World War Finnish society was worried about families` poverty, child labour, high fertility rate and children that were born outside of marriage. The main resource of family welfare was private charity.  In the beginning of 1900s school meals and clothes aid were started for pupils at primary schools. Shelters for single-mothers and their children were started. The tax allowance for families was the most significant family policy benefit. (Hiilamo, 2002, p. 55, 59-60) The meaning of tax reductions decreased during the decades and in 1994 all family related tax reductions were removed, including the single parent reduction. (Repo 2009, s.39-40)

After the Second World War Finnish family policies started to develop. They were characterized by universalism and individualism. Policies included means-tested allowances aswell. The first direct income transfer was introduced in 1937. The maternity grant was first paid for mothers of many children and poor mothers which included two-third of all mothers. (Hiilamo 2002, s. 69)

The child allowance was introduced in 1948 which was the breakthrough of universalism in family policy. It was a response to widespread poverty among families. (Hiilamo 2002, s. 74) Child allowance is still the most important transfer for families in Finland. In the low-income families the child allowance can cover up to 15% of the family`s income. (Repo 2009, p. 39-40) Every 10th family saved or invested the child allowance in 2018, whereas all others used them for family`s expenses. (Kontula 2019, p. 112) The amount of child allowance for single parents has been raised during the last years. In 2020 the single-parent supplement to child allowance is 63,30€ for each child. (KELA 2020) Families with low income prioritize, in most cases, the needs of their children. This means that these resources will benefit children: economical support

gives children a better material living standard or helps them indirectly by helping their parents have less worries. (Sandbæk & Grødem 2009, p. 194-196)

The Nordic countries started to expand family and child services in 1960s. (Daly 2015, p.799-800) Child poverty was combatted with targeted benefits. E.g. Special allowances for single parents were developed as the number of one-parent families increased. The housing allowances were implemented in 1990s. (Hiilamo 2002, p. 79-80) The challenge with targeted allowances is that they do not always reach out to all families, because the parents might need to pay for the support with their self-respect or by losing face. (Sandbæk & Grødem 2009, p. 194-196) Yet the social transfers are proven to reduce poverty of lone mothers massively in the Nordic countries. (Esping-Andersen 2002, p. 36)

Maternity allowances system was introduced, and day care services were developed in 1970s when already 67% of Finnish women were already working. The aim was to prove gender equality (Hiilamo 2002, s. 76, 84) Finnish family policy supports "earner-carer" model. The day-care law from 1985 tells about strong individualism as it gave the subjective right for day-care for all children. (Repo 2009, p. 37) This right was reduced for part-time in 2016 if one of the parents was home e.g. due to unemployment, unless a child needed special support. In 2003 Finland introduced father`s quota in order to get fathers to participate more in the care of small children. (Hiilamo 2002, p. 85)

Esping-Andersen claims that the realistic social inclusion policy for single mothers must combine subsidized or free daycare with income guarantees, whether they work or not. To support single mothers' employment is important, because poverty is generally triggered by the lack of income from work. It is also important that the jobs are compatible with single mothers of small children, meaning part-time jobs, jobs with flexibility and job security. (Esping-Andersen 2002, 32, 36-39) Employment should not be stressful so that mothers would still have energy and possibility to spend time with their children (Esping-Andersen 2002, p.49) Mother`s employment has been shown having positive effects on childhood disadvantage if the mothers have rewarding jobs. On the other hand, employment has negative effects if the mothers` jobs produce stress and fatigue. (Esping-Andersen, 2002, p.57)

Cash-for-childcare, that supports parental childcare at home, challenges the Finnish "earner-carer" model. CFC scheme is supported by the idea of parents` choice between childcare services

and cash transfers of taking care of your own children. Parents` choice is not done in vacuum, but in the context that is very complex and multidimensional, including cultural norms, moral rationalities, social constructions of motherhood and childhood, labor market and social benefits. (Sipilä, Repo, Rissanen & Viitasalo, 2010, p.25-26)

In Finland the CFC was presented in 1985. The use of CFC in Finland is the highest among the Nordic countries: around 50% of children (9 months- 3 years) receive CFC per year and about 9 out of 10 children receive CFC at one point. About 95% is paid to women. (Duvander & Ellingsæter 2016, p. 80) The inflexibility of Finnish parental leave period, temporary employment and unusualness of working reduced work hours are structural reasons for the high use of CFC in Finland. Long care leaves have gained strong legitimacy and are considered in the best interest of the child. CFC has become an important alternative to unemployment, and it might have been chosen because of a lack of alternatives. (Duvander & Ellingsæter 2016, p. 83-84)

The benefit is low (327.46 €) and prerequisites the presence of a main provider and is likely to support a traditional family model and gendered division of labor. This questions if CFC is a real choice for one-parent households and can lead a family into a risk of poverty. The usage of public childcare makes less distinction between one- and two-parent families. (Duvander & Ellinsæter 2016, p. 71-80) Also Sipilä & al. point out that relying on CFC benefits can be financially a risky decision for lone mothers. In Finland childpoverty is increasingly related to the use of CFC. (Sipilä & al., 2010, p.28)

According to a questionnaire to Finnish families in 2018, Finnish families appreciate time with family, and they valuate it more than a good economic status. Families want to choose how they take care of their children and they don`t want to shorten CFC allowance. They wish more appreciation for the work that families do and more support for everyday life with children and low-threshold services. (Kontula, 2019, p.118-120) Families wish also for more flexibility in working life, including flexible working hours and possibility to work part-time. Flexibility is also wished for in parental allowances. (Kontula, 2019, p. 110-112)

The worries of families aren`t only national worries and interests. The welfare of children has become a goal of global politics as well. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p. 20) According to the Convention on the Rights of a Child parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing

and development of the child. The state Parties "shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities." The best interests of child need to be considered in all action concerning children. (Convention on the Rights of a Child, § 18)

In 2013 European Commission published Recommendations "Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage". Single parent families should be focused on in fighting against child poverty. (European Commission 2013) Commission recommends preventing the transmission of advantage across generations by early intervention and prevention. This is most effectively achieved through integrated strategies that combine 1) supporting parents' access to the labour market with adequate income, 2) supporting access to services that are essential to children's outcomes, such as quality education, health, housing and social services, as well as 3) opportunities for children to participate and use their rights. The child`s best interests should be taken as a primary consideration and children should be recognized as independent right-holders. The state needs to "support parents in their role as the main educators of their own children" and to "help families develop parenting skills in a non-stigmatising way". (European Commission 2013)


## 3.2. Family Work

Family work has an important role in recognizing families` worries early enough and interfering in them. In family work worries connect strongly with early intervention. It is a concept that can be understood in many ways, but the focus is in supporting families and children early enough when it is still possible to prevent the risk of social exclusion. Parenting support in early intervention is focused on parent-child relationship and activating parents into active parenting through their own inner competence and expertise. (Sihvonen 2016, p. 131,135) Early intervention is a process where family`s participation is as important as professionals`: family has an active role in decision making and their wishes and individual needs are considered. (Pyhäjoki & Koskimies 2009, p. 186; Beelman, Brambring & Rauh 1996, p. 3)

Yet, family work is often done from the point of professionals` worries. Subjective worry can be presented as professional's tool to recognize the right things that need to be interfered with. Worry arises for the worker when she or he observes the family and in the interaction with

family members. Different workers have different experiences about worry, because they have a different kind of relationship with a family. Professional's worry is also connected with his or her ability to support the family. If the worker experiences having methods and a good relationship with the family, she doesn`t worry too much. But the worries grow if the worker does not feel that he or she is able to support the family. (Pyhäjoki & Koskimies 2009, p.187-189)

Eriksson and Arnkil introduced "worry`s zones" as a method for taking up one`s worries when a worker is uncertain about how to take up a subjective worry concerning a child or a family. The goal is to get into a dialog where both workers and parents can describe their worries. To talk about worries early and openly with parents is important. To interfere is seen as a promise of working together for the family`s best. Discussion is meant to continue by planning the future action together. "Worry zones" is a tool for a professional to recognize how worried she or he is. Worries are categorized as 1) no worries, 2) some worries or wondering, trusting own resources to act, but thoughts about needing support, 3) considerable worries, running low on own resources, and experiencing need for support and control of situation, and 4) big worries, no own resources left and experiencing immediate change for situation. (Pyhäjoki & Koskimies 2009, p.189-191) Also, many small worries can be more problematic than dealing with one huge worry.  (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 216)

We need to also see that society and culture define what the workers are worried about. There are many kinds of reason for being worried and society decides which worries are important to focus on. Whereas society chooses which worries it needs to try to solve, it also chooses to ignore others. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, s. 23) The worries are closely related to the normative thinking of today`s "good motherhood", which is a very complex concept. (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 216) History shows how different issues have been in focus in different times: E.g. in 1970s the numbers of divorces grew, and society worried about these families and children. Today divorce is not seen as a problem, as long as it does not cause suffering for children. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, s. 19) When certain worry is on, the workers easily interpret all signs as a proof of the particular worry. E.g. family might not like to use curtains, or they might come from a culture where curtains are not used, but a worker might interpret that as a sign for not having money to buy curtains or not being able to buy curtains because of depression. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p. 22)

It seems that society works a lot from the point of its own worries. Families` participation in family work has been in focus only for the last few decades. (Beelman et al. 1996, p. 196, Uggerhøj 2014, p. 202) The Finnish Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients stresses that clients` wishes, opinion and individual needs need to be taken into account. Plans shall be drawn up in mutual understanding with the client. (The Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients 2000, § 4) National and EU Alignments stress the meaning of user voice. The service users are seen as significant developers of services. The customers should be encouraged to tell their own opinions and wishes about services. This will guarantee happy customers and better outcome of tax money. In social work it is relevant to talk about special type of customership, because the level of client`s ability to participate varies a lot. (Stenvall & Virtanen 2012, p.142-143, 168-169)

It is not obvious that a client is an actor and not an object in family work. Workers represent powerful organizations. Even though the workers have the best interests to help and support clients does not mean that the clients automatically get support for their worries. (Uggerhøj 2014, p. 201, 203) Fragmented and bureaucratic service system, neither the techniques of social services, do not always manage to catch or understand casual and unexpected worries of customers. Being too interested in the client`s own worries and perception can be seen as a threat to the system as well. (Uggerhøj 2014, p. 208,211)

Professionals are the key for participation or non-participation of families. (Crawfors 2012, p. 71, Uggerhøj 2014, p. 201) Because of the power relationship, it can be difficult for the service user to participate on an equal basis. Professionals have values and understanding that are based on knowledge and education, whereas the service user talk about their experiences. These two points of views can be different and even in conflict with each other. (Crawford 2012, p. 73-74) The worries of the mother can be seen less important than the worries of the professionals.

The research shows that the service users feel respected and involved in the process of presenting and evaluating their needs and problems, when they are seen as experts of their own life and when plans and goals are made together with the service user. It is important that the worker has time to talk, concentrate on and listen actively on the client. Service users wish that social workers would show more of their human decency by containing some informal talk, showing emotions and using experience from their own life in conversations. It is important to build

relationship with the service user and not to hide behind institutional, logical and rational professional role (Uggerhøj 2014, p. 205-206, 208) It is important to see mothers and families as independent subjects that has worries and not to see them as social work`s objects themselves.

In the questionnaire in 2012, Finnish parents informed that they were worried about their financial situation, their intimate relationships, losing control in conflicts with children and feeling insufficiency as a parent. Mothers had more worries than fathers and they worried about loneliness and having all the responsibility as a parent. (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 219) Parents that were worried about their financial situation, worried more often about their own wellbeing and their parental skills aswell. Single parents informed having more worries than other parents. (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 220,222)

Parents` need for support varies according to the reason of their worry, resources of the family and the safety net of the family (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 225) Under 30% of the informants say that they have gotten support from family work for their parental worries. Reasons for not getting support might be caused by fragmentation of the services, not seeking for help, limited resources and that their worries aren`t recognized. (Halme & Perälä 2014, p. 225) A study shows that the more accessible the services are, the better is parents' experience of getting help from them. Single parents and parents with poor finances evaluate the family services less accessible. Moreover, when compared to other parents, they were also less satisfied with the gotten support they received compared to other parents. (Perälä, Halme & Kanste 2014, p. 234) Also, the more worries families had, the less satisfied parents were with the services. (Perälä, Halme & Kanste 2014, p. 237)


## 3.3. Social support and peer support

Social support can be divided into three types of support. It can be emotional, offering empathy, love and trust. It can also be intellectual, offering suggestions and giving advice. Thirdly, it can be practical, including services and goods. (Bullock 2004, p. 143-145) Families and especially mothers are shown to benefit from social support and peer support. Social relationships and sharing experiences are resources for wellbeing. Most mothers experience getting most social support from fathers and their spouses, but also extended family members and friends can give

social support for a mother. Grandparents, especially a mother`s own mother, are experienced as significant supporters by mothers. (Tarkka, Paunonen & Laippala 2000, p. 24-25)

Kelleher and Johnsson proved in their study that parents that get social support have a greater ability to cope with stress and are more confident as parents. They also had more positive interactions with the infant and responsiveness to the needs of the infant. (Kelleher & Johnsson 2004, p. 302) Both social networks and social support are related to depressive symptomatology. Women who reported having two or more available friends or family members showed notably fewer depressive symptoms. (Surkan, Petterson, Hughes & Gottlieb 2006, p.381)

Peer support is a special form of helping activity, where mothers can share their worries and receive support. It is based on parties sharing similar experiences and sharing experiential knowledge. (Eronen 2020, p. 576) Potentially all participants can be both givers and receivers of support. (Smith, Drennan, Mackenzie & Greenwood 2018, p. 164) In peer support and peer group the ownership and control rests with their members. If professionals are involved, their role is to support the group according to its member`s wishes and needs. (Eronen 2020, p. 577) In Finnish society the peer groups activity of mothers is largely disregarded as a communal resource. (Eronen 2020, p. 577) It is often e.g. organizations and churches that coordinate peer groups for mothers.

Peer support groups are considered to be a safe, non-judgemental forum, where mothers can share also powerful emotions. (Hill 2001, p. 392-393) Eronen has studied mothers` experiences in mothers` peer groups, where most of the mothers were in socio-economically weak position. She found out that in peer groups mothers share experiences according to their own needs openly and confidentially. Trust among mothers is essential and it guarantees that no-one is defined as a "bad mother". Mothers talk not only about their children, but also as women about their own needs. Mothers learn also from each other: when someone shares knowledge based on their own experiences, it provides learning opportunities for others. Mothers also provide practical help for each other, including taking care of each other's children. (Eronen 2020, p. 579-581)

It is common for mothers to feel lonely and isolated. That seems to be related to not knowing how to handle new situations as a parent. But when mothers share experiences together with other mothers, they have a chance to reflect and find their own way of being mother. Contact with other mothers confirms the normality of their experiences and emotions. The feelings of shame, quilt and isolation can be eased through peer support. However, if a woman`s experiences differ from

those of the group, the feeling of isolation and being a failure can increase. (Alsveit, Severinsson & Karlsen 2010, p.116-117)

## 4. Methodology

In this chapter, I present my research questions and the hermeneutical phenomenological approach. I will also explain the role of a researcher in phenomenology. Then I will explain how the research interviews were done and the procedure of my data analysis. In the end of this chapter I will bring up ethical considerations.

### 4.1. Research Questions

This study`s goal is to describe the single mother`s experience of motherhood in the Finnish context. The study is focused on three interwoven themes of motherhood: motherhood, single parenthood and parental support. My research questions are:

1. How do single mothers experience motherhood?
2. What kind of worries do single mothers experience as mothers?
3. What kind of experiences do single mothers have about getting parental support in the areas of their worries?

### 4.2. Hermeneutic phenomenological approach

My approach in this study is hermeneutic phenomenological. Phenomenology is a philosophy concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them. It aims at describing the common meaning of lived experiences of a phenomenon. My goal is to describe and interpret the single mothers` experiences of worries and to explain how they understand motherhood and parental support from their perspective. (Moran 2000, p.4, Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 75) It is not possible to present a specific description of hermeneutic phenomenological approach, but I will present the foundational thoughts of the approach here. They need to be applied in every research in a way that achieves the actor`s experience and meanings the best way. (Laine 2007, p. 33)

I am studying the single mother`s experiences of motherhood. The concept of experience is not easy to explain, and it can hold different meanings. It can refer to external events experienced, to the way those events are registered by people or to the meanings that people give to their

experiences. (Skeggs 1997, p. 27) A person`s relationship to the world is intentional through his consciousness. (Laine 2007, p. 29, Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 76) Everything means something for a person. Motherhood has different meanings for different people. I will focus on studying the meanings that single mothers give for motherhood, worries and parental support.

Phenomenology tries to describe the universal essence of the phenomena. The founder of Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, suggested that through reduction it is possible to find the universal idea of phenomena. (Dermot 2000, p. 60-61) But Martin Heidegger stressed that the experience relates to a person`s life situation, time and society. (Dermot 2000, p. 222) We cannot understand a person`s experience without understanding her relationship with the world around her. A person is constructed by her experiences and her material, economic and cultural surroundings. Phenomenology calls experiences intersubjective. (Laine 2007, p. 30) People living in different surroundings live in different realities, because they have different meanings for their experiences. This means that we cannot understand the experiences of motherhood without understanding e.g. motherhood in Finland, their financial situation and single parenthood. This means that my study is limited to the experience of motherhood and how that phenomena is understood by my interviewees in Finnish context. Phenomenology is not interested in universal generalizations but in common understanding that is colored by different and unique experiences of the interviewees. (Laine 2007, p. 29-30)

Hermeneutics refer to the theory of understanding and interpretation and it focuses on the communication between people. (Laine 2007, p. 31) We do not have pure experiences. When interviewees represent their experiences, they make interpretations. (Skeggs 1997, p. 28) They choose what to tell, what is important, what is not interesting etc. Research cannot be neutral, because it requires taking a stand on what action means. (Risjord 2014, p. 46)

Both phenomenology and hermeneutics suggest that social science requires two levels of ideal types. Alfred Schutz called the first level the level of common-sense thinking. It contains the "theories" used by a group of people to understand each other. The second is the social scientific models of motivation, feelings and meanings. (Risjord 2014, p. 44) Whereas the interviewee explains naturally, not-reflectively her own experiences and the meaning of them on the first level, the researcher tries to reflect and conceptualize her story on the second level. (Laine 2007,

p. 32) Charles Taylor suggested that the social scientific concepts should be seen more like translations of the subject`s language than representations of their beliefs. (Risjord 2014, p. 46)

## 4.3. The role of the researcher

Hermeneutic phenomenological approach has some requirements for the researcher. Schutz required that the actor should understand all the theories and the concepts of the researcher. (Risjord 2014, p. 44). That might not be possible, but at least the researcher should be somehow familiar with the subject`s lifeform and culture in order to be able to understand the meanings of the subject`s experience, their own concepts and motivations. (Laine 2007, p. 32) This dialogical approach is beneficial when collecting data, but it can also make it difficult for a researcher to keep distance to, reflect on and take a stand on the data. The fact that I had no other relationship with my informants, helped me to keep some distance to their lifeworld. (Ulvinen 2012, p.65-66) My own experience of motherhood in Finland, Sweden and Norway have made me to analyze parenthood from many perspectives.

Reflexivity and self-criticism are also important in phenomenology. If a researcher is able to recognize and reflect on the background conditions of the research and her own presuppositions, the research becomes more valid and objective. Through bracketing, the researcher can identify his beliefs, values, interests and social roles that are relevant to the subject of study. Bracketing has its limits though. It is not easy for human beings to see their own deep commitments and break free from prejudices. The solution could be to focus on reflecting and describing the methods, how the data is produced, and the results. The methods should be included in the analysis as well. (Risjord 2014, p. 62-63) I will focus on reflecting the methods and being critical to my own choices and interpretation as well.

## 4.4. The context of the research interviews

Phenomenological interview should be open, natural and close to a conversation. It should give as much space for the interviewee as possible. The interviewer should guide the conversation as little possible. The focus should be on talking about concrete personal experiences.  (Laine 2007, p. 39)

I chose to conduct mini focus group interviews. I chose this method both because it served my research purposes, but also because group interviews were possible to accomplish. Focus group is a method to develop an understanding about why people feel the way they do and to hear participants perspectives. It also helps to understand social phenomena as intersubjective. (Bryman 2016, p. 502) This goes together with the goals of phenomenology.

Mini focus group was also a practical way to interview single mothers with small children. The interviews were conducted in a third sector organization that work with single parent families. The interviews were done during the regular gatherings for single parent families, so that the workers were able to take care of the participants` children. This, though, limited the interview time for one hour. That is why I chose to take only 2-3 participants for each interview.

In the focus group the discussion can develop freely so that the subjects can easier say what they think is important and interesting. The interviewer, in focus group called the moderator, should intervene as little as possible. The moderator should intervene when the group is struggling in its discussion, or to lift up something that is said and appears significant for the research. The moderator's duty is also to open and close the interview and encourage all the members to participate in some degree. (Bryman 2016, p. 511) The activeness of participants varied a lot in the interviews. In most interviews my participation was minimal. In one interview I needed to encourage participants to talk throughout the interview. But mainly my role was to introduce the themes to talk about, to nod and listen to the participant`s experiences and ask them to share more about the meaning of their experiences. Some participants had so much to say that I had to intervene and make sure that other members got a chance to talk as well.

Participants are expected to challenge each other and even argue (Bryman 2016, p. 502), but this did not happen in my interviews. In all interviews, the participants were very encouraging and understanding towards each other. They tried to find common understanding, which served the purpose of phenomenology. The interviews produced also data about the phenomena as social construction, but in this study the focus group was more of a practical solution to be able to interview many mothers. It also gave a chance for mothers to participate as much as they felt comfortable with and my understanding is that it was easier for some mothers to participate in the interview that was done in a group. The group kept the conversation going. What one

participant said gave the other participants ideas of what they wanted to talk about and comment. Here is one example.

*Aino: "Migraine is really difficult. Then you just put a scarf on you eyes (laughs) and turn on the cartoons on TV and go lying on the couch and hope that the child would get on there."*

*Kaira: "That is why the social network is so important for all people, but especially for single parents it is important, and to have family close by"*

*Milja: "My mother is the only one who can be with my child and every time I ask her if it would be okay this time, she always says that she can't promise for sure or book that time, and that is annoying sometimes (smiles shortly). I'd like to know for sure in advance." (Milja)*

The fact that the participants followed each other's opinions affected the content of the interviews: If the first participant answered that motherhood is wonderful, others followed this positive view of motherhood. And if the first answered that motherhood is tiring, the others continued with the disadvantages of motherhood. My role as a moderator was also to give a new direction to the conversation.

Interviews were conducted in November 2019 and they were recorded. Interviews took place in an organization that organized family work directed to single parent families. Before starting the interview, all participants filled in a background form and signed the informed consent. The interview included three themes and I had prepared a few questions about every theme. (see appendix 2) I presented the questions only if the discussion did not flow otherwise. In two of the groups, some mothers had their baby or toddler with them in the interview. One mother was knitting during the interview. Also, the room for interview was relaxed and rather cozy. Two of the interviews were conducted during the morning activities for single parent families, which meant that most of the mothers were home with their children. In two interviews that were conducted during the evening groups, some of the participants were working. Right after each interview, I made reflexive notes about my observations, impressions, thoughts about the interview situation and my role as an interviewer.

All together I had 11 participants in the interviews. They were 18-41 years old and in average 32 years old. 7 out of 11 had a secondary education, three of them had primary education and one of them had tertiary education. The participants had 1-4 children each, in average 1,8 children. The age of their children varied from 1 to 19 years old. 11 of the children were under school age. 10 of the mothers called their family a single parent family. One mother was in a relationship, but

she counted herself as a single parent. The participants had been single mothers 1 to 17 years, in average 6,5 years. Most of the participants had been single parents from the first pregnancy. Two of the mothers became single parents after one to two years after the first child was born.

Many of the participants felt it difficult to count their income and the term gross income felt confusing for them. Those that did announce their gross income, earned 900 -2800€ per month, in average 1655 €. Their income included, in order of frequency, child benefit, maintenance allowance, income support, cash-for-childcare benefit, unemployment benefit, salary income, student benefit, housing benefit, sickness benefit and parental allowance. Seven of the mothers reported that their financial situation is poor, four of them feel it is moderate and none of them feels it is good.

**4.5. Data Analysis**

The interviews included three themes: motherhood, single parenthood and parental support. These three themes were chosen beforehand for the mothers to share about. But within these themes I tried to interfere as little as possible. After transcribing the interviews, I read them through to get an overview about what mothers wanted to say about these themes.

I have done the analysis in two levels according to the phenomenological principles. The common feature for phenomenologist analysis is horizontalization, meaning that all the elements of the text are considered to be of equal value. (Priest 2002, p. 56, Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 79) First I read the interviews as a whole in order to get the big picture of the data. But then I started to make choices of what parts of the interviews were considered meaningful to the study.

I started by forming the first level of common-sense thinking. The goal was to give a description of the mothers` experience as close to their original story as possible (Laine 2007, p. 40) I gathered the statements about how individuals are experiencing motherhood. I used the words of my informants at this level. (Laine 2007, p. 40) I categorized their experiences according to three themes: motherhood, parental support and their wishes, hopes and needs as mothers.

In the next level, the goal was to develop clusters of meaning from the significant statements (Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 79) The significant parts of the story of the informants was to be

transformed into themes and concepts according to the research questions. The goal was to describe the essence of phenomena, yet to describe the richness and unique sides of the experience. Phenomenologist say that it is by intentionality that the clusters of meaning are "seen". It requires that researchers familiarize themselves with the data but also the lifestyle of the informants. (Priest 2002, p. 52; Laine 2007, p.41) I have been in dialog with the data and tried to be critical to my own presumptions. Even though the clusters were easy to "see", I have tried every now and then take a step backwards and reflect on the choices that I had made.

Lastly, I wrote a composite description of the essence of the phenomena. It focuses on the common experiences of the participants. (Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 80) The goal is to present a general view of the phenomena and include the most common worries that the data included.

Because my goal is to let the mothers voice be heard, I did send the written analysis by email for all participants that gave me their email for this purpose. I wanted to give them an opportunity to be part of the analysis. The only feedback I received was short and positive.


## 4.6. Defining worries

Single parent family is a form of family that the society is worried about. (Nätkin 2003, p. 31) Worries can be based on problems or risks that threaten families. But worries can be also based on the knowledge of how a good and normal family works. This means that the concept of worries is wider than a social problem; it includes all differences from "normal". (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p. 18)

Being worried can be approached as a person`s mental state and something that she or he needs to work with: a person needs to learn not to worry. But in my approach the solution is societal. I will look more at the mothers worries from the perspective of the Richmond`s person-in-situation theory: the solution to their worries is found in own resources and coping strategies, but also in the society that can support parents in managing their worries. (Cornell 2006)

Worry is always subjective and an experience. (Nätkin & Vuori 2007, p. 20) Worrying is something abstract. Worry can be general or directed at a certain case. (Nätkin & Vuori, p. 20) There is a great difference in the volume of worry: Worrying can mean to take care of things or

to be scared and panic about things. Between these two ends worries can be called doubt, uneasiness, troubles and problems. The interviewees talk about things that are heavy, negative or challenging. In my analysis I will not be looking only the word worry, but try to see of the context, what things worry the informants.

The surrounding world affects mother`s experiences of worries also. Media and professionals give a picture of a "normal" and "good" parenting and family. (Nätkin & Vuori, p. 18) Mothers compare themselves to that picture. That picture includes also a moral picture of a worried mother; the mother should be rather worried than relaxed, especially if she is a single mother. Being in a marginalized group means that single mothers are expected to prove that they are good parents. (Roivainen, Nylund, Korkiamäki & Raitakari, 2008, p. 14, 132, Krok 2009, p. 71) Being worried can be also a way to show that they are good parents.

## 4.7. Ethical considerations

This research involves collecting data from people and about people and it is my obligation as a researcher to protect the research participants. I have followed the ethical principles of research with human participants in Finland. (Kohonen, I., Kuula-Luumi, A. and Spoof, S-K. 2019) Throughout the research process I have tried to respect the dignity and autonomy of participants of this study. The dignity of mothers was discussed when designing the research design and when forming the interview questions. In the interviews I focused on emphatic listening and interrupted their discussion as little as possible. I had no other role with the participants, neither had I met any of them earlier.

I have been aware of the stigma that the concept of single mother has, and I have tried to avoid further stigmatization by using natural concepts like mothers, by letting mothers define themselves and also by treating them, their stories and opinions respectfully. I think that the place for the interview was good in the sense that mothers felt welcome there. It was a place where single mothers were in charge and I was a guest.

*Taina: "It was easy to come here as a new person, I was welcomed really well. In other places I have felt an outsider, I haven't belonged to the group..."*

*Helena: "I have exactly same thoughts about this (smiles shortly). I felt welcome here..."*

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*Aino: "This has been absolutely the best place, I used to go to MLCW (Mannerheim League for Child Welfare) but I got tired of listening to how somebody's husband was doing an evening shift and she had to be alone all evening or how the husband was on a business trip for 3 days and she was all alone. Then you think that, after all, your husband comes home in the evening and then you can for example take a shower."*

Research situations included mental strain and emotional experiences, but according to my evaluation they didn`t cause significant risks, damage or harm to research participants. (Kohonen, I. & al. 2019, p. 50-51) The participants received information about the research and the content of the interview in advance and they had a right to withdraw from the interview situation. I also instructed the participants before starting by saying that they could participate in the interview as much as they wanted. A couple of times mothers said in the interview that they didn`t have anything to say. I considered that as a refusal to answer.

All participants signed an informed consent (see appendix 1), which specified how the data would be used, where the results would be represented and how their personal data would be handled. According to the transparency principle laid down in the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union (GDPR), I have informed research participants about the processing of their personal data in privacy notice. (see appendix 3) I was surprised by the openness of the participants in the interviews which made me want to respect their privacy and dignity as well as possible throughout the research process. I deleted all personal information when I transcribed the interviews. I have also tried to minimize telling and writing about where the interviews were done. After finishing the analysis, I deleted the recorded interviews.

The interviews included many moments like friends having a conversation with each other. The interviews included a lot of joking, laughing, but also crying. Some of the participants commented afterwards that the interview had been a positive situation to reflect and share their experiences. Some of the interviewees felt that they got to know other participants better and became closer friends.

As a gratuity for the interview the participants received one ticket for children`s adventure park. I was surprised how popular it made it to participate in the interview. There had never been so many mothers attending the group activities as how many came on a day that I came to recruit

participants. It was comfortable and nice, but  it made me wonder if it was ethically correct to motivate mothers with an adventure park ticket; Maybe they had to exchange their experiences for research purpose with a ticket that they could not afford otherwise.

## 5. Worries of single mothers

In chapters 5 and 6 I will present the results of the analysis. This chapter includes the worries that my interviewees experience. I will start by describing the experience of their motherhood in order to understand the worries in the right context. After that I will present five types of worries that single mothers expressed in the interviews: 1) worries about having all responsibility alone, 2) worries about their financial situation, 3) worries about mother`s own wellbeing, 4) worries about fatherlessness and 5) worries about their family model.

### 5.1. Motherhood is a gift

Most of the interviewees state that motherhood is a gift to them. It is something positive that they have had the privilege to experience.

*"Well, I think that motherhood is a great gift and mother is a person who gets to bring safety and share joys and sorrows, always present in the child's everyday life." (Kaisa)*

Even though many of the pregnancies weren`t planned, mothers say that their children have changed their lives for better and children give meaning and purpose to their lives. The responsibility of motherhood is seen as something positive because it places them to a very important place in this world. Some of the mothers feel that life would be empty without children and they wonder where they would be without them.

*"It feels like I'm important and that I have a mission. Yeah, that I have a mission and purpose in this world… And I try to raise my kids to the world as well as I can." (Taina)*

*"My life would be quite empty, like when I was alone…I wouldn't change a day. Yeah, this is really wonderful." (Jaana)*

Motherhood gives the interviewees an experience of unselfish and mutual love. They experience that children love them in good and bad days and they also experience closeness with their children. The time spent with children is meaningful for them and it is rewarding e.g. to play and go for little trips together with children. Motherhood has also helped some of them to put boundaries on their own lives. The challenging educational situations with children are viewed as opportunities to learn and develop their character.

*"That unselfish love that they show…they want that we give hugs in the evening and then I tuck them in bed." (Aino)*

*"It's always nicer to do things with a child than alone." (Anu)*

*"Motherhood also teaches you a lot, that you realize some new aspects of yourself and you can develop your character in different situations that the everyday life with the child brings forth… it is those small simple things that really matter the most in life, those that we share together. That is maybe the most important thing." (Kaisa)*

Single mothers see parenting alone as a normal and positive condition. They feel that this form of life allows the parent to give all attention to the child without communication and conflicts with another adult. They have grown into their role which means being alone and carrying the responsibility alone. Their family form is natural for them.

*"In my opinion it is normal to live like this, that it is only a child and me." (Juulia)*

*"I think it's wonderful to be a single mother and I like it and because I've gotten used to it." (Taina)*

Even though the experience of motherhood is rewarding and natural for most of the interviewees, some of them don`t really share this experience. Some mothers feel that motherhood includes more worries than joys. And for all of them it is an experience that includes both worries and joys, just in different portions.

*"Worrying and a continuous concern are the topmost thoughts about motherhood, I could have said some beautiful words (smiles shortly), like wonderful love and warmth, closeness, of course there are those, too." (Minna)*

## 5.2. Worries about having all responsibility alone

These worries include two types of worries that are closely related: mental worries about having all responsibility alone and worries about having the responsibility of everyday responsibilities alone. All participants share the experience of being emotionally alone. They feel that they aren`t able to share the joys and sorrows of parenthood. They experience deep loneliness and inability to share parenting with anyone. They feel that it is not the same to tell your mother or your friend that your child has learned something as it would be to share things with a child`s dad or a spouse.

*"Maybe it is hard that if something happens, like good or bad, there is really no-one who would be interested, it doesn't really matter if you tell your friend because somebody else can tell her that "my child learned to say mom", so the friend only says "great". And you are so happy about it and no-one understands." (Milja)*

*"It's hard that there is no-one to share things with…when the child did something funny or learned something new, you have NO-ONE to tell it to. Even if you had called your sister or mother or father and told about it, it still wouldn't be the same as if the child's father would be interested in how the child is doing." (Aino)*

Many of the interviewees have been alone with their child since pregnancy and they tell that the feeling of being emotionally alone started already when they realized that they were pregnant. They questioned if they would be able to become parents all alone and if they would fill the requirements of parenthood alone.

*"I was really afraid because I was alone already when I was pregnant, like how all would work out, because what is it, I've never been a mother…you think everything, will the baby be alright and is there something wrong with his/her development and when the baby was born small, that is there something… you think all the time. When you stop worrying one thing, there is another thing you need to worry. And when you are alone, you can't share those things with anyone, really." (Juulia)*

*"I've been alone during both pregnancies, when I was pregnant with the first baby, we broke up, or how do you say it in a nice way, the father of the child kicked me out, so I've started from nothing, worrying has been constant." (Minna)*

Being alone means also being responsible of everyday life alone. Mothers describe it as being on duty 24/7 or being on always standby and being ready to act if needed. It is a never-ending circle of small tasks like washing clothes, helping kids, feeding children, putting them to bed and so on. It includes also a strong feeling of "must do": if the child wakes up every night several times, you just have to take care of the child every time and if the mother gets a stomach flu, she must take care of children then too. It means that the mothers are seldom physically alone and never without responsibilities.

*"I have to take care of everything in everyday life and sometimes that alone is really hard." (Noomi)*

*"It's always doing laundry, dishes, cleaning surfaces, everything, sand is everywhere" (Kaisa)*

Mothers react differently to stress and responsibility. Some of them plan things ready as early as possible and prepare for the coming day when children sleep. They are also prepared for

surprises: They have medicine, an extra meal in the freezer and a little extra money for a taxi in case of an emergency. And, for safety`s sake, they ask others to take care of their children in case they wouldn't make it home in time.

*"It is good organizing, scheduling and anticipation. Planning ahead, so that things really work when they should. You need good nerves, too. When I think back, when I look at the calendar, I ask how did I make it through this or that, but you just plan when others sleep, so you plan and book everything ready as far as you can…all those school things and clothes ready for everybody for the next morning, and you anticipate everything in your everyday life and see that everything is ok, all basic things that are needed. Surprises don't feel so big then if they come. (Kaisa)*

*When I was alone, I did things for good measure, I asked someone if she/he could pick up my girl from the kindergarten if I had to stay longer or if I couldn't make it in time…Ensuring things… (Aino)*

*And yes, you have medicine at home, if someone becomes acutely ill, for example in the middle of the night, you have all the basic medicines ready in the cupboard that you might need so that you don't have to go to the emergency department immediately, and that you always have some extra money so that you can quickly buy something if you need, and you always have some extra food in the freezer or somewhere if everybody suddenly gets a stomach flu (laughs). (Kaisa)"*

The capability to organize, plan and anticipate isn`t natural for all mothers. Some mothers tell that they are working on creating routines and practices. Mothers talk about other ways of coping with the responsibility alone. They say that they need patience and capability to tolerate chaos. They have also cut the corners and lowered their own standards in order to manage everyday life. Those mothers who have older children and those who call their children "easy", children without special needs, seem to stress less about the responsibilities of everyday life.

*"You wonder quite often if everything is enough, but I've developed an attitude (smiles shortly) that at home it might look whatever it looks like but we try to go outside and to kids' clubs and have a social life." (Taina)*

*"With me it's always been like I've tried to learn routines for Pete's sake, but I`m still learning, I should really learn good routines so that everyday life would become smoother and easier…and I myself would like to do more different things but starting, for me, is always really challenging or to get something done and then you realize that time flies and then there's no time to do things anymore." (Noomi)*

Others react by worrying about the future and feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities. They worry e.g., if someone will become sick tomorrow, if they have clothes for kids in the next size up and generally if everything will be well tomorrow. Some mothers have forgotten things like their son`s birthday and daughter`s doctor appointment, because they have just too many

responsibilities. Mothers that worried about children`s health issues and special needs, seemed to be more worried about tomorrow than others.

*Minna:"What happens tomorrow, is everything well tomorrow, and of course those things that are already happening, they make you worry."*

*Hanna: "Well, the one thing that you always worry about is that what if someone falls ill."*

*Minna: "Yeah."*

*Hanna: "It feels like you always have to be prepared for someone to fall ill with any disease, it can be pinworms, hand, foot and mouth disease… Maybe lice, and somehow it feels that you have to be prepared all the time, day and night, and stomach flu can start in the middle of the night… I start to worry in advance, I have to be alert."*

Some mothers find also a positive, an individualistic side of being alone. It gives them the right to be independent and decide about everything by themselves. There is no need for discussion and compromises when deciding about things like school and clothes for children. Mothers enjoy deciding everything about their children alone. Moreover, children don`t have to listen to their parents fighting.

*"I think it in a very positive way, because there is no other person saying "don't do it this or that way, do it like this or like that", you can decide about things that concern the child by yourself. Like if I want to buy something, then I buy it to my child, and if I want that my child goes to this school then I put him/her there and I don't have to ask "do you want him/her to go to this school" and "would that be ok". You can decide everything that concerns your child by yourself." (Anu)*

*"It's positive that you can decide about everything by yourself, that there is no other person with whom you have to agree, but in a way, it would be nice to have someone to share everyday life and experiences with." (Noomi)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers are worried about having all parental responsibilities alone. It is mentally heavy not to be able to share the joys and sorrows of parenthood. For many interviewees, this mental loneliness started already during the pregnancy. It is also heavy to be always on duty and take care of children and household alone. The capability to organize, plan and anticipate, routines, being prepared for surprises, but also cutting corners and being patience are their ways to cope with the everyday responsibilities. Mothers enjoy making decision about

their children alone, but they are worried about not having anyone to share the experience of parenthood with and about taking responsibility of everyday responsibilities.

## 5.3. Worries about finances

Finances causes worries and stress for mothers. In the interviews it is obvious that finances is a difficult subject to talk about. Mothers who have school-aged-children talk most about their financial situation in the interviews. They emphasize how they have to buy e.g. sport equipment for school, make-up for a teenager and how they can`t find a cheap piano teacher. One mother is scared of sudden expenses and financial worries give her sleeping problems. Another mother tells that she doesn`t dare to tell other parents how low her income really is.

*Jaana: "It's maybe those (financial problems) that cause me most stress. And, I have everything and don't really need anything, but maybe I need help in like, like financial matters. That would be something which I'd need most, at least at the moment."*

*Moderator: "When you say that it causes stress, how does it show in your everyday life that you are stressed about finances?"*

*Jaana: "Well, I think maybe it shows best in how I sleep, that I don't sleep well."*

*Moderator:  you think about it"*

*Jaana: "Mmm"*

*Moderator: "How you will make it"*

*Jaana: "Yeah, maybe all those sudden expenses and when nowadays kids should have all things for school, I should buy skates and skies for both of them, and when it's not okay to use the cycling helmet when you go skating, that you should have a skating helmet for that and I really can't afford to buy those every year and so…"*

Some mothers whose children are under school age also express that they worry about finances. Some mothers worry if they can afford to buy clothes for their children and one mother worries if she has money to buy groceries for her children. Many of them take it for granted that single mothers have a low income. The average income of the interviewed mothers (1655€/month) is also considered low in Finland and most of them think that their financial situation is poor.

*"Already now I think about clothes in two years, if I don`t have them, I'll buy them in the flea markets now. Because there is so little money, you have to buy them from where you can. And the continuous thinking about food. Do I have money at all to buy food?" (Hanna)*

*"There is no extra money because we are single mothers." (Milja)*

The virtue of saving is praised: mothers buy secondhand clothes and they do not waste money on themselves. Mothers prioritize their children`s needs instead of using money on themselves. For some mothers, living on a low budget is a choice. They prefer spending time with their children instead of earning money and sending their children to daycare.

*"Well, we are doing financially okay, Pete doesn't have many expenses, but we buy all of our clothes in the flea market and don't squander money. We have two cats, they have been a little sick so we've had to put hundreds of Euros to vet bills, but we have been doing quite okay really. It has probably affected that I haven't done much, I haven't spent money on my own things because there hasn't been time or I haven't had many possibilities to do my things." (Noomi)*

The low income of the participants is seen in the organization`s work as well. When I for the first time came into the room of the family work, second-hand clothes from a recycling center were laying on the floor and mothers were choosing clothes for their children. Children put on their new clothes immediately and presented them proudly to me. The participants are very thankful for the warm meal that the family is given there for free. They have also a change to get charity food from EU food bank.

*"Then there is charity food here, that if you don't have enough money (Helena: mmm), on Mondays you can take charity food and buy something else for the kids which I've done and "stranded" myself (laughs) but yeah you can get help and on Thursdays you can get a warm meal which is really nice that I don't have to cook at home (Helena: mmm)." (Taina)*

Mothers also express that they wish they had money to buy services in order to get help in household work. But they cannot afford that. The low income limits their choices when trying to find solutions for everyday life responsibilities.

*"…I could have hired a cleaning company but I didn't have money." (Kaisa)*

*"There are all kinds of services here…But I don't have money to pay anyone anything." (Hanna)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers worry about their finances. Mothers with school-aged children worry more about their financial situation, but most of the mothers consider their financial situation poor. They cope with low income by saving, buying secondhand products and by getting charity clothes and food. They prioritize the needs of their children instead of using money on themselves.

## 5.4. Worries about mother`s wellbeing

*"Motherhood is also about taking care of yourself so that you can then take care of others. That is really challenging and important about motherhood." (Kaisa)*

It is important for a mother to take care of her own wellbeing. But this can be challenging, especially for mothers that are alone with their children. Because the mother is the only guardian in the family, it would be even more important that she was healthy. Mothers know very well that their wellbeing is related to children's wellbeing.

Mothers worry about getting their own needs met. It is not self-evident that mothers eat proper meals. They sleep short nights and plan and work in the nights instead. Even when a mother is sick, it is very difficult for her to get rest. Mothers feel that there is no peace in everyday life to take care of their own needs. Children need their attention all the time.

*Milja: "You can never be in peace. When you cook, someone screams and pulls your arm. When you go to the toilet, someone wants to sit on your lap (laughs)."*

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*Milja:"If you have for example norovirus and you throw up all the time and lie on the bathroom floor and then you try to bathe your child, it's difficult (smiles shortly). It's really challenging if you catch a sickness and you have to be with your child and people don't want to come and help you because you're sick and they're afraid of getting it too…"*

*Aino: "Migraine is really difficult. Then you just put a scarf on your eyes (laughs) and turn on the cartoons on TV and go lying on the couch and hope that the child would get on there."*

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*Aino: "…sometimes the only warm food you got was ice-cream (laughs) and the coffee you drank was always cold."*

Mothers also prioritize using money and time for their children`s needs and use money on them. They forget to take care of themselves, even though they know that it is important.

*Helena: "Yeah, there is not much time for yourself and at times you just forget to take care of yourself."*

*Taina: "Yes! I've quit putting on make-up (Helena: laughs). I don't put make-up on anymore, I used to put on make-up, it's horrible that I don't do it anymore, it's just that I don't really have money to buy make-up, but next time I get money I could really buy, somehow I have just quit taking care of myself (others: yeah, yeah) and I really should take care of myself."*

Most of the mothers worry about having too little time for themselves. Mothers tell that it is a luxury to take a shower alone, do grocery shopping alone, do household work alone or just be alone with your own thoughts. Moreover, mothers need time to take care of their own health, e.g. for a doctor`s or dentist`s appointment.

*"It really feels a luxury if you have two hours for yourself, that you can take the rubbish out in peace or you can go grocery shopping in peace or at least take a shower. That you can be there in peace. It feels unbelievable, can life really be like this sometimes (laughs)!" (Kaisa)*

In order for a mother to get time alone, she needs to arrange childcare for her children. This seems to be a challenge for most of the interviewees. Many of the mothers feel that it is uncomfortable to ask someone to take care of their children. Some of them feel that nobody ever offers childcare for a few hours, but that they themselves need to ask for it every time.

*"How uncomfortable you feel to ask someone to be with your child…It's really uncomfortable to ask, because it is your child and you feel that it would be bothering or hard to the other person. It's not easy." (Milja)*

Some mothers take care of their wellbeing by going to work or by studying. They feel that they get their social needs met by meeting friends and by seeing other adults. For a young mother studying gives her a change to feel like any other young woman and it means a lot to her to eat warm ready-made meals at school. Mothers express that studying and working helps them to be better mothers in the evenings. Work is viewed only positively in the interviews. No-one talks about work as a stress factor.

Where some mothers say that they would get crazy by taking care of their children at home, others have enjoyed being at home and don`t see that work life would have improved their own wellbeing. Some mothers would have loved to stay at home longer if their financial situation would had allowed that. One mother took care of her own and children`s wellbeing by going to

open childcare center four times a week. Mothers who are home with their children are motivated by spending time and being close to their children whereas mothers who work are motivated by taking care of their own wellbeing and earning income for their family. Even though some of them feel guilty of having their small children in daycare, they also see that daycare is good for their children`s development and social skills.

*Minna: "A mother is all the time aware of what happens around her, that she could rest sometimes. If you're in the same room with the child and you're responsible of him/her alone, it doesn't matter if you're in the same or different room with him/her, you're always aware of what the child is up to. If you're alone for many years, it gets worse and worse and worse and then when the child goes to kindergarten and you should go to work, you're burned out. You don't have the body or brains to go to work…"*

*Juulia: "That's exactly the reason why I started working when my girl was one year old. If I had stayed at home, my head would have exploded. At work I see adults, my way to work is real luxury (everybody is laughing) because I can listen to music with full volume!"*

*Minna: "When my children were small we went to a kids' club four times a week. If I had stayed at home, I would have probably ended up in an insane asylum quite quickly, because if you're in a bubble all the time, it really starts to get on your nerves. It helps a lot when you go somewhere…"*

Some mothers feel that they have been exhausted and not doing well because of parental responsibilities and challenges with their children.

*"She had gastroesophageal reflux and she was allergic to milk and these were diagnosed only when she was almost one year old. I didn't get help from anywhere, so I've been really exhausted…she has had physiotherapy and all possible things…Why us? As if we didn't have enough difficulties all the time without this, so why do all the difficulties come to us?" (Minna)*

Mothers have experienced mental illness, for example depression and burn out. Parenthood isn`t always the reason for mental issues, but mothers feel that despite their own difficulties, they must take care of their children.

*"I have depression which has affected, I haven't had as much energy and strength." (Noomi)*

*"Chairs broke and tables broke, everything, because I was alone day and night and I was down in that black hole. If I had had a loving partner with me 24/7 I would still have gone through very difficult feelings and conditions. When I was doing it all alone, I was sometimes really alarmed that I have to take care of a child and I'm like this." (Hanna)*

*"It happens very easily that you start shouting and making noise. At home, I pushed furniture very roughly and the child is there watching and wondering what is wrong with me. And when your thoughts are confused and all kinds of things happen and you try to be calm, but even the family worker said that*

*the child still senses instinctively and that is why he doesn't sleep. And then you think that what can I do here? (laughs)" (Milja)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers worry about their own wellbeing. They know that taking care of their own wellbeing is important, but it is a challenge. It is not easy for them to take care of their basic needs, such as eating healthy food and sleeping enough, because children`s needs come always first. Mothers prioritize the needs of their children in time and money usage and it is challenging for them to get time for their own things. Many of them have experienced mental problems. For some of them, working or studying is a way to take care of their own wellbeing: social life, getting out of home and earning money is a way to take care of themselves.

### 5.5. Worries about fatherlessness

Before starting the first interview, all participants signed the informed consent. One of the mothers noticed that the date she wrote on the paper was her children`s father`s birthday. She wondered aloud how the father would be celebrating his birthday and thought that most probably he was partying, drinking and using drugs right now. This was only a start. The absent fathers were present throughout the interviews. It surprised me, because they were supposed to be absent. Fatherlessness seems to be a sensitive and difficult issue both for the mothers and their children. Mothers worry about how to deal with fatherlessness with their children and many of them also struggle with a difficult relationship to the father of their children.

Mothers say that the most difficult thing with being a single mother is to talk about father with their child. Their children have compared themselves to their friends in daycare, at school and learned from TV programs that other children have dads. Then children have asked their mothers about their own dads. Fathers` day handicrafts and celebrations worry mothers, because they need to figure out to whom their child will make a card and they need to answer questions about fathers. Some mothers suggest changing father`s day to "neighbor's day". One mother expresses that Father`s day is a double difficult time for her, because she grew up without a dad and now her child lives without a dad, too. Moreover, mothers worry about the future: how will fatherlessness affect their children? Some of them wonder if their children will become mentally

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ill or will be taken into custody because they grow up without fathers. Even though mothers worry about children not having a masculine parent, they feel that there is nothing they can do about it.

*Hanna: "It's a big worry."*

*Minna: "Kids' mental health as adults, how much they will suffer."*

*Juulia: "I already think about teens. Will the child start to react to her fatherlessness and how. Or will she react to it at all. I wonder if she will become a horrible teenager and if I'll have to put her to an institution and then… Well, these are only bad mental images but I do think about this weekly, that what will my child be like as a teenager."*

*- - -*

*Hanna: "In our case, it's nothing, fatherhood is nothing. It's nothing, that mere genetic…"*

*- - -*

*Anu: "And probably the negative side is that the child starts to ask where daddy is and starts to think who hir dad is and those are, in my opinion, miserable things."*

*Taina: "And now when Father's Day is coming (others: YES!), there's pressure from Fredrik, that where is daddy? And I think that oh no, I guess I should call him that Fredrik hears the voice of dad."*

Many of them have tried to maintain relationship with children`s fathers. But they feel that it has been one-sided, and fathers have not taken their responsibility in building a relationship with their children. They also feel that it is unfair that the law gives father a right to meet his children, but it does not guarantee a child to meet his or her father. Mothers feel that it is difficult to try to suggest meetings and take contact again and again, if the father is not motivated. Maintaining the father-child relationship demands too much from the mothers on top of all other responsibilities. Many mothers describe fathers as difficult, unwilling, hard to communicate with and narcissistic. Only one mother tells that she and the father are friends.

*"This is really challenging, because a child indeed needs both a father and a mother, and it would be important that relationships to both parents were good. But if the mother is always the one who takes contact and suggests meetings, it just won't work out, and at some point even that fades away because in the challenging everyday life with kids you don't have the strength to contact a person who only wants to argue with you…if the other one really is a difficult person, who doesn't want or won't do anything else but complicate things, there is no power which could help in that situation. Yeah, it's difficult and it makes me annoyed because it's not always my own choice." (Kaisa)*

Mothers also tell about unsuccessful meetings with the fathers. They describe fathers as unknown people to their children. Genes do not guarantee attachment or a bond to the father. Some mothers tell about situations in which their children weren't eager to meet their dads, they did not want dad to change their clothes or bath them and they met their dad only to get gifts, such as like new sneakers and a backpacker. Mothers also feel that they are accused of children`s unwillingness to meet fathers.

*"It happened with us, too: when the child saw his father, daddy was not allowed to change clothes, couldn't start playing when he was in his lap. And when it was time for a bath, the child started a tantrum and climbed to me saying that he is not going there. Yeah, it's a cruel thought, but somehow I want to say that do you understand, even if the child has your genes and he is biologically yours, there is no connection to you if you don't keep contact with him. You're a stranger." (Milja)*

Mothers also describe their difficult relationships with the children`s fathers. Mothers say that they feel guilty of having or fighting for sole custody. Fathers, who have not tried to build a relationship with children, accuse mothers of stealing children from them. One mother explains that after she got help in form of a support family, the father started to fight for custody. One mother tells that after the child health center submitted a child welfare notification of the father, he punished the mother and children for it. These accusations and fights about custody seem to be very heavy burdens for mothers. Mothers are tired of fighting and arguing. Moreover, they are not only worried about the relationship to the father, but it seems that some of them are scared of the father.

*"The father of the child was, and still is, narcissist, and he has harassed and troubled us for many years and that has been a really horrendous mental burden to bear. And when you have a sick, crying child there, it all has been a continuous burden, all the time, there is not one second of peace there, you can't rest even a moment. Even if you were alone somewhere, you still can't rest but your brain works all the time and you think about it. - - - With a narcissist person you can't...a child welfare notification has been submitted about him by the child health center and when I tried to forbid it, say that don't do it, because that causes such a hell... which then also happened." (Minna)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers worry about how to deal with fatherlessness with their children and many of them also struggle with a difficult relationship to the father of their children. They are worried about how fatherlessness will affect their children in the future. They have tried to build a relationship with the father, but they feel that fathers have not been motivated to do their part.

## 5.6. Worries about the family model

As we have already understood, when spending time with other families children figure out quite fast that their own family is different from the majority. So do mothers. Without anyone saying anything, they are aware of being different. Mothers explain how difficult and painful it feels to represent a different form of a family than the majority does.

*Kaisa: "It is really difficult, because if in the music school for small children or in other clubs somebody says that daddy comes soon and then we will go to the store with him, or that daddy has cooked at home and now we will eat, I feel terribly bad. It's wonderful that they have that, I'm not bitter, but every time it excruciates me somehow, that you will go with the father and that it would be so nice if we had a father in this family, too. But we don't."*

*Milja: "I recognize this, I used to go to a day group for almost a year and there were parents there who had one or two children and a husband and a house of their own and all. Then, when we were at a camp and the other mothers were there with their husband, because you were allowed to take your family with, even if you don't want to feel that way because it's very nice that other people have it, but you still feel a little bad when you're alone all the time. So yeah, I recognize the feeling."*

*- - -*

*Juulia: "I feel that we're the only family like this in Kangasala."*

*Minna: "I'm sure you're not" (laughs)*

*Juulia: "But in the Family Club and other places it feels like it." (Juulia)*


These experiences and feelings make them very sensitive about what they hear and read about single motherhood. They describe situations in which family members, friends and co-workers have said something negative about their family form. They also feel that the media and social media put a lot of pressure and talk negatively about single mothers. Mothers tell that they sense it and they read between the lines what people think about them. According to their interpretation, they then decide how open they want to be about their lives.

*Kaisa: "Even in 2019 it is really strange how people curse single parents and what kind of pressure they put on you from different places. That and that kind of a single parent, as if we were really bad people, even if it is necessarily not our own choice that we are single parents."*

*Aino: "Yeah, many times you feel that you've cheated these children to yourself and that you've tricked the man and become pregnant, and that you yourself have wanted to be in this situation. So what do you complain about; even if people don't know other people's situations."*

*Kaisa:"What I read from the media and especially from social media, many times they blame the woman. Even though the father had disappeared, and he wouldn't be interested at all. Somehow people accuse mothers."*

*Milja: "People have said it straight to my face that do you get money from the social welfare office, that this is what you wanted."*

*Aino: "Or child support, you get child support (laughs)."*

*Milja: "This kind of commenting, it is really annoying. And if the father is not interested at all; I sometimes think that single parents should be appreciated, if they were not interested at all either, the child would be somewhere there."*

*Aino: "Taken into custody"*

*Milja: "Yes! That it's really fine if the father abandons the child, and people expect the mother take the responsibility. And then you can criticize the one who is taking the responsibility that she wanted herself, and so on. I think it's wrong. I think that the father, who doesn't want to be a part of the child's life, he has equally been a part of making the child, that he should hear more negative comments than you, who try to carry it all alone there."*

The interviewees talk about their experiences of being accused, pitied, silenced and separated from others. Many of them have experienced being accused of living on social benefits and they have heard that they are bad people. They have been told that it was their own fault or choice that they became pregnant and that the father left because of the mother`s difficult character. They have also heard people saying they should not complain about their circumstances because they chose to become pregnant. One mother has been in a situation in which mothers of nuclear families did not want to associate with her. Another mother feels very uncomfortable when others are pitting her by wondering how she can make it all alone.

Mothers feel that they are accused for no reason. They feel that they have experienced injustice. In the interview, together they dare to defend themselves with a fighting spirit: It was not their own choice to become single mothers. It was the fathers who left, and the mothers were the ones who stayed and are now carrying the responsibility. The fathers should also get their part of the accusations and mothers should be appreciated for taking care of their children.

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers worry about their family being different from the majority of families. They have also experienced being accused, pitied, silenced and separated from others because

they are single mothers. They feel that it is unjust to accuse them because they are the ones who carry the responsibility of their children.

**6. Society`s support for single mothers` worry management**

In this chapter I will present how single mothers experience the Finnish society supports them in managing their worries. I will describe how family policy, family, peer support and family work support mothers. I will also focus on what kind of support the mothers would like to get in order to manage their worries.

**6.1. Family Policy**

In the interviews, it is evident that the mothers are very aware of their rights; they follow politics and know well how to apply for parental support. According to the mothers, family policies support them in their finances and in their own wellbeing.

The interviewed mothers are very grateful for all financial support they receive. Most of them are very happy about the 10€ child benefit raise which single parents will receive in 2020. Many of them express that even though it sounds little, it is a big help for them and that it is enough to buy food for one day. One mother who works full-time says that the raise does not mean anything to her. Some mothers called this a political trick: It is very little money for mothers, but a lot of good publicity for the government. Mothers who live on the income support mention that they will not benefit from the raise because it will be subtracted from the amount of income support. Many of the mothers express that they would like to get more financial support.

*"Yeah, 10€, it does help you with the monthly costs. It's a lot, it's a wonderful help!" (Milja)*

*"Yes, 10€ is a lot even if it sounds little, but with 10€ you can for example get food for one day. (Others: yes!)" (Anu)*

Mothers discuss their choices and motives between choosing to work and choosing to stay home with their children. This is a choice that affects their own wellbeing and their financial situation. They call this choice a personal choice and a choice that everyone is free to make on their own. The interviewed mothers do not feel that the society would demand single mothers to work more than mothers in general. The motives to work that were mentioned were mother`s wellbeing, social needs and career. Finances was referred to only once.

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*"In my opinion, and as Milja said it well, it's everyone's own personal thing and choice. Both have positive aspects. If you think about your own working career, you'll for sure have time to work for tens of years, the child is small for just a short time. But a small child needs other children who are the same age as s/he and that is what s/he gets in a kindergarten. So it depends on how you see it." (Kaisa)*

*"Then workmates, they say that how can you stay at home this long because we couldn't. And they were in a relationship and had mortgages and everything…but I don't have any loans and I try to get by, but many are surprised, especially those who have not been able to…" (Taina)*

The possibility to work part-time was not mentioned in the interviews. That might be because it is not something to which the mothers have possibility. However, one mother had positive experiences about an employer who had been supportive and had given her only shifts that are possible for a single mother. This is a good example of how one employer can affect mother`s wellbeing and help her to combine work and single motherhood.

*Juulia:"My manager came to talk to me one time and said she had been thinking what kinds of shifts I can do, because I work in three shifts. She knows that I'm alone with the child and she came to ask me what kinds of shifts I want."*

*Hanna: "Wow"*

*Juulia: "And asked what kind of roster I'd like to have and said that I can always come to talk to her if I have something. I think it is really great! In a work community."*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers experience that family policies support them in their financial situation and in their own wellbeing. They are grateful for all financial support they receive, and they see that single mothers can take care of their children at home if they themselves choose to do so. Mothers mention social life, career and finances as their motives to work. Moreover, they would like to receive more financial support from the society.

## 6.2. Family as a safety net

*"Safety net for all people, but especially for single parents, it is really important that family is close."* (Kaisa) *"*

A family that is close and willing to help is a great help for mothers in everyday life and in taking care of their own wellbeing.  Many of the interviewees get most help for everyday life

from their own mothers, but also from their fathers, sisters and children`s other grandparents. Many mothers describe their mothers as the best help. Grandmothers take care of children and help in practical things such as buying food. Many children also sleep overnight at their grandparent's place. When grandparents take care of children, mothers have time for their own things, e.g. they have time for their own doctor appointments, they meet their friends and sleep through the night. Mothers describe their own time as counterbalance for being on duty all the time. On their own time, they can rest without the responsibility of children. This means a lot for the interviewed mothers. Furthermore, the awareness of receiving help at some point helps mothers to carry their daily responsibilities.

*"Well, I have a really young mother who is now a really young grandmother and she helps a lot in everyday life. We visit her at least once a week. I don't have a car or a driver's license so she takes us to the stores and sometimes I also get time of my own. The child stays at her place overnight or just spends the day there, maybe a couple of times a month and that is a big help." (Helena)*

*"Yeah, if I have a dentist's appointment or need to go somewhere my sister often comes to help, she has been on a sick leave for a long time now. And of course my mother, when she is not working, she tries to look after Pete and that's how I've gotten some time of my own…It helps you to carry on when you know that soon you can rest for a moment and do your own things and you don't have to be alert all the time. It's a big thing, yeah." (Noomi)*

*"My own parents have been my best safety net, and now lately, during the last year, the other child's grandparents. It is quantum, even if the help is random and small-scaled, it is really important if you get a little time of your own." (Kaisa)*


One mother calls herself fortunate for having a mother who helps. It seems that those interviewed mothers who have grandparents helping, have less worries. Grandparents are able to share the responsibility of taking care of children and give mothers time to take care of their own wellbeing. But not all mothers are that fortunate. Some of the mothers live far away from their parents and not all grandparents are willing to take responsibility of their grandchildren. One mother explains that her mother can never promise to help until the last minute. Two of the mothers tell that when they moved into the city, they had no-one to ask for help from.

*"My own parents live 300 kms away and I didn't know anyone here before I visited this family club." (Jaana)*

*"My mother is the only one who can be with my child and every time I ask her if it would be okay this time, she always says that she can't promise for sure or book that time, and that is annoying sometimes (smiles shortly). I'd like to know for sure in advance." (Milja)*

*"There are mothers who have no-one, so I consider myself fortunate because I have my mother and she's been a great help." (Aino)*

Interviewees hope that family members and friends would sometimes ask if they could help them somehow. Even a little practical help would be appreciated. It would be important to be committed to helping so that the mother could plan her own time as well. They also hope that their motherhood, family form and decisions concerning children would be appreciated. They suggest that when a mother is expecting a baby alone, a meeting with a social worker was recommended already during the pregnancy and the safety net of the mother was surveyed. A support family is mentioned in the interviews as a source of similar support as grandparents are.

*Kaisa: "It would be good if the single parents' safety net included a meeting with a social worker already in the beginning of the pregnancy, for example after visiting a child health centre, in the child health centre premises. They could map…"*

*Aino: "Yeah, that would be good!"*

*Kaisa: "…services, it would be good that already at this point they could estimate what kind of help was needed."*

Many of the interviewed mothers also hope they had a father or a spouse in the family. Mothers emphasize that a spouse would support in sharing the responsibilities and being a father figure in the house. But mothers think that even though dating is wonderful, taking care of a relationship is demanding and requires energy that they don`t have when they have all responsibility of small children. Moreover, to find a trustworthy father figure is considered difficult; father figures do not grow on trees.

*"I sometimes hope I had someone, that we could be a family, and I had a man who would be able to protect us as well. I, as a woman have to take care of the family and I feel nervous in some situations and I hope that I had a man to protect us here…(cries)…taking care of a relationship, it's really challenging and when you have small children, teenagers, and you should have energy to take care of the relationship; at the moment I don't have energy for that kind of a thing." (Kaisa)*

*"I would also like to have a partner to share things with, who would equally love and take care of the child. And not only me." (Hanna)*

Composite description:

Many of the interviewed mothers get help from grandparents, especially from their own mothers. Practical help is emphasized and appreciated. Mothers can share the daily responsibilities with grandparents to get some own time and a chance to take care of their own wellbeing. However, many grandparents live far away or are not willing to take care of their grandchildren. Many of the mothers hope to find a spouse who could help them in sharing responsibilities and who could be a father figure in the family.


## 6.3. Peer Support and friends

According to the interviewed mothers, the most important form of help from grandparents is practical help. The most important forms of help they get from friends and other single mothers are mental support, sharing worries and asking for advice. Mothers explain that it is important for them to share and talk about their worries. Morover, social life gives them strength for everyday life. It seems that their social life reduces their worries of having all responsibility alone and it is a way to take care of their own wellbeing. One mother tells about a friend who has been a big help for her and has also taken responsibility of her children.

*"I've got peer support from here." (Milja)*

*"Sanna has helped in taking care of Fredrik. Fredrik had a dark spot on his neck, and it was rough, and I was wondering what it was, that maybe I should take him to the doctor if it is skin cancer or something (smiles shortly). I can ask her [Sanna] these kinds of things and share my concerns with her" (Taina)*


Social community with other single mothers seems to be very important for the interviewees. In the family work targeted at for single mothers, they all feel welcome and enjoy sharing openly about their lives. Mothers call it their community. Peer support seems to make them less worried about living on a margin. It is a place, where mothers and children have gotten friends. Furthermore, socializing with other mothers gives them a chance to talk about their children, challenges they face and a possibility to see how other mothers interact with their children. One mother explains that it is comforting to see that it is not only her child who has a strong temperament. They feel that "normal" open daycares are not their communities because they feel outsiders there.

*"These kinds of clubs and other things that are targeted at single parents, these have been really good in getting mental support. And it has been nice to get friends." (Kaisa)*

*"Peer support and friends as well…and children make friends here." (Jaana)*

*"And you see that other children get tantrums, too, that it's not only my child (smiles shortly). That helps a little, too, to understand that okay, it's not only my child who has a strong temperament, but other children have, too." (Anu)*

Mothers talk also about the limits of the support that they receive from each other. Often, it is not enough to only talk about worries and they are very limited in being able to help each other in practical ways.

*Minna: "We do also all support each other as peers, but none of us can carry the other one's burdens or help with the everyday responsibilities. I mean, you can talk a lot and share your experiences and feelings but in a way"*

*Juulia: "You're, after all, alone."*

Yet, many of them say that other single mothers have been their best help in need. Single mothers have helped each other by taking care of each other`s children in turns. They also explain that when other people only send comforting messages to a mother suffering from stomach flu, another single mother offers practical help.

*"My oldest child was very young and here I got to know other single mothers who sometimes let my child stay overnight at their place and I let their children stay overnight at my place or their children came to my place to play during the day, and that way you had a short time just for yourself." (Aino)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers are able to share their worries with their friends and other single mothers. The community of single mothers helps them to manage their worries about their family model. Even though peer support means mainly mental support, single mothers help each other by sharing parental responsibilities as well.

## 6.4. Family work

Different types of family work were discussed in the interviews. They included family work which is directed to single mothers in the third sector organizations, family work as a part of the

municipality`s social work, open daycare organized by the municipality and the Lutheran church and short time childcare provided by municipality, Lutheran church and a third sector organization. They all have the same structure: the society provides a service for single mothers to support them in their parental responsibilities. The organizer does not seem to be important for mothers, the discussion focuses on the support that they received or did not receive.

Mothers see that family work has supported them in handling the worry of carrying all responsibilities alone. Workers take care of children, play with children and take them out to play. These activities are often done together with the mother. One mother was given a ride to an open daycare center. Family workers have also given mothers information about other services. Mothers have good experiences of doing household chores together with family workers and they appreciate the workers` determined way of guiding them.

*"We have excellent family work services. Family workers come for two hours a week and once, when I was doing not so good, they came twice a week and for two hours each time. And now, when they've become close, if they see that I'm tired, they can help me do the dishes or put the dishes in the dishwasher or clean up or something like that. And then we play together with the child." (Milja)*

Mothers explain that family work has also helped them in taking care of their own wellbeing. Family workers have taken care of their children for a few hours so that mothers have been able to relax, watch tv or have coffee with a friend.

*"...out of the home care allowance, carer for the child comes once a week for a few hours, so I get time for myself...I always look for it (smiles shortly) because I can relax for a moment. She goes for example out with Pete and then I can watch tv (smiles shortly) and something like that." (Noomi)*

Many mothers hope they would get help in household chores. They suggest that the family worker could do household chores or do them together with the mother, or that the mother would get money to pay someone to do household chores.

*"I say it straight: help to do household chores, I mean really, it would be wonderful if I could for example clean together with someone, but it's always doing laundry, dishes, swiping tables, all, and there's always a lot of sand inside" (Kaisa)*

*"They could hire a person or they could give more money with which the mother could hire a worker." (Hanna)*

The mothers explain that long-term relationships with family workers have been very meaningful to them. Mothers describe these relationships as confidential. They have become close and relaxed with the workers and almost like friends with them. The mothers feel that they can talk to the workers about anything, not only about things concerning children. It seems that this reduces their worries about having the responsibility of everything. The mothers appreciate it when workers show genuine interest in them and their children, are flexible and unofficial.

*"Jaana has been really great, I couldn't have made it without her. I have cried so many times with her over so many worries (sighs)…she always answers the phone if you call her even if it wasn't office hours (laughs) and answers texts. And I feel that she is genuinely interested in how we mothers are doing." (Aino)*

*"I think we connect as people and…like… friends, and not like these are the workers and I am the one who needs support." (Helena)*

Those who have not experienced a confidential and long-term relationship with workers, hope to experience it. They tell that it takes a lot of time to explain the routines of their children and how the household works to new workers. They also explain how hard it is to every time explain their life situation and their relationship to the children`s father. They all hope to have a personal relationship with a family worker who would familiarize herself with the mother and the children.

*Minna: "When there is trust between two people, you trust your kids with someone or…and very many workers talk about things, they discuss and help and support you, so it's good that it is the same person. That you don't have to explain the same things over and over again."*

*Hanna:"And for the child it's good that it's the same person, there is continuity…"*

*Minna: "And it takes a lot of time to figure out how things happen in this family and who goes and where and at what time and where everything is and what the children eat. When do they eat? When do they sleep? It takes time."*

The mothers also describe situations in which the support and their needs did not meet. One mother tells that she was too tired to receive the kind of help she was offered. She would have needed help in household chores, but the workers wanted to go for a walk and talk about the aims of the support. The mothers also mention some conflicts with family workers. One mother feels that family workers put pressure on her to have an abortion and that they lectured her about contraception.

It seems that the interviewed mothers have different experiences of how easy or difficult it has been to get support from the society. Mothers under 20 years old seem to have gotten help easier than older mothers. The rules and regulations for getting support have changed during the years and they were discussed in the interviews. What was not discussed in the interviews was on which grounds mothers received or did not receive support. Some mothers tell that they were never offered help in any form and that they had to fight to get e.g. someone to take care of their children in order to go to a dentist. Two mothers have submitted a child welfare notification of themselves in order to make sure getting support. Mothers wish that support would be offered to them.

*"Somehow I feel that I haven't really got, like it was with family work…I had to fight a lot to get help from family work, and then when I had a dentist's appointment, they didn't send a family worker; it feels that I really had to fight to get a worker to come. And they didn't come regularly, only if I had to go somewhere. Somehow, I feel that support should be offered, especially to single mothers, that you wouldn't have to fight for it and figure out yourself from somewhere if you can have it. That it would be offered to you. Nobody ever offered it to me, I asked about it in the child care centre and got a number to which I had to call. So, I think that support from the society has been quite little." (Aino)*


On the other hand, some mothers did not want to get support. One mother tells that a public health nurse was pushy in offering all kinds of services that she did not want, but later she continues that she did not get information about the kind of family work she was interested in. Another mother explains that she felt ashamed for asking for help until she was burned out and understood that it is better for the family if she asks for help and feels a shame if she does not.

*"Sometimes I felt ashamed for asking for help, but then at some point I was so tired, I was burned out, and then I understood that it is better for my child and for my family to ask for help, that I don't have to be ashamed of it, that I should be ashamed if I didn't ask for help." (Taina)*


Family work targeted at single parents is a place where mothers receive peer support in the areas of fatherlessness. There they can talk openly about fatherlessness and one mother mentioned that it has also been possible to get legal advice from a lawyer. Mothers hope to get support for communicating with the fathers, even if they, on the other hand, think that communication is not possible. They hope that the society would demand fathers to take a bigger role in their children`s lives.

*"We need support for a better communication between the parents, but if there really is a difficult person there, who won't and doesn't want to do anything but complicate things, then nothing can help in that situation." (Kaisa)*

*"I think that the father, who doesn't want to be part of his child's life, even though he has been equally part of making the child, he should hear more negative comments." (Milja)*

*"You can't require, there is no law which would require the father, no agreement obligates the father to meet, but the father can decide that he wants to meet and then the child is taken anywhere to meet the father even though s/he didn't want to." (Aino)*

Composite description:

The interviewed mothers have gotten support in taking care of all responsibilities alone and for taking care of their own wellbeing when family workers have taken care of their children. Confidential and long-term relationships with family workers are appreciated. Family work that is targeted at single parents supports them also in handling their worries about fatherlessness. Younger mothers seem to get support easier than older mothers. Receiving help is not easy for all of them. Mothers hope to get more support in household responsibilities. They also hope that the society would support them in communicating with the fathers and in demanding the fathers to take a bigger role in their children`s lives.

## 7. Discussion

The interviewed Finnish single mothers worry about having all responsibility alone, their financial situation, their own wellbeing, their children growing without a father and thus their family model being different from nuclear families. Their worries are strongly connected to social norms, expectations and ideologies. In this chapter, I will discuss the relationship between the worries of single mothers and the society as to how the norms and ideologies of the society cause worries in single mothers, and their experiences in getting support from the society to managing their worries. I will also discuss how society could support the single mothers managing their worries better and ideas for future studies.

Single motherhood is the culmination of the society expecting more from mothers than fathers as parents. Gender has a lot to say in parenthood. Fathers can choose if they would take the father`s role or not, whereas mothers are expected to live with the children, take care of them as well as rest of the household. Single mothers carry responsibilities for the economic wellbeing as well. Feminism has given them the right to study, work, earn money, option to whether have children or not and the right to be independent. Yet it is often too much to carry and the rights become responsibilities when the mothers carry them alone.

Single mothers worry about having to go through emotional loneliness and having all responsibility alone. It bears heavily on one to not to be able to share the joys and the sorrows of parenthood. Many of them continue to experience emotional loneliness that already started during the pregnancy. Secondly, it is heavy to be on duty always and take care of children and household alone. The capability to organize, plan and anticipate, routines, being prepared for surprises, but also cutting corners and being patience are single mothers` ways to cope with the everyday responsibilities.

Single mothers understand that it is important to take care of their own wellbeing, but at the same time, it is a big challenge. It is not easy for them to take care of their basic needs like eating healthy food and sleeping enough because the need of the children always come first. The needs of the children in terms of using time and money get prioritized over the mothers' own so it is challenging for them to set time aside for their own things. The interviewed mothers worried about their wellbeing. Many of them have experienced mental or emotional problems. This is in line with the previous studies that suggest that single parents experience more often being

mentally burdened and having health issues than other parents. (Kaikkonen, Mäki, Murto, Pentala, Hakulinen-Viitanen & Laatikainen 2014, p. 163) For some of them, working or studying is a way to take care of their own wellbeing. Such mothers were motivated to take care of themselves, whereas the other interviewees were more motivated to spend time with their children and were willing to put the needs of their children first.

Loneliness and lack of support are the main reasons for tiredness among mothers. (Jokinen 1996) However, many of the interviewed mothers got support from the grandparents, especially from their own mothers. They appreciated receiving practical help from the grandparents. These mothers were able to share the daily responsibilities with the grandparents and in turn enjoyed some downtime and had opportunities to take care of their own wellbeing. Social support has been proved to have positive effects on a single mother's ability to cope with stress, being confident as a single parent and to help lower depressive symptoms. (Kelleher & Johnsson 2004, p. 302, Surkan, Petterson, Hughes & Gottlieb 2006, p. 381) A support family is mentioned in the interviews as a source of similar support as grandparents are. Single mothers can be divided into groups according to the degree of social support they received. Some of the interviewed mothers got a lot of support from the grandparents, whereas the others` grandparents lived far away from them and yet for some the grandparents were not willing to take care of their grandchildren. The society needs to give special attention to the mothers that do not receive help from the grandparents, other family members or from their friends. The interviewed mothers suggested that the safety net for single mothers should be surveyed already during the pregnancy.

This study has shown that the worries of the single mothers are mainly the same as society`s worries. However, the workers and the clients do not communicate at the same levels: the clients talk about their experiences whereas the workers base their understanding on the knowledge and the education. Sometimes the views can conflict with each other too. (Crawford 2012, p. 73-74) The interviewed mothers appreciated confidential and long-term relationships with the family workers. Genuine interest in the mother and her children, flexibility and unofficial communication from the worker's part reduced mothers` worries about having responsibility for everything alone. It is important that the workers consider the wishes, opinions and the individual needs of the mothers. Some of the interviewed mothers also reported that they were too tired to discuss and make plans for family work, and instead, they wished to get more help

with the household responsibilities. However, practice advice for parenting or help for short-term childcare and housework do not fit the current idea of psychological oriented parenting support. It can also overshadow economic and social structures that do matter in parenthood. (Sihvonen 2018, p. 135) Sensitivity and understanding the needs and the wishes of the mother play an important role in successful early intervention family work.

Most of the interviewed mothers did not choose to stay alone with their children. Many of them wished to find a spouse who could help sharing responsibilities and be a father figure in the family. However, the single mothers considered taking care of such relationships to be demanding. It would be interesting to study the views of the single mothers on relationships and family life. It would be also interesting to study how the society could help these mothers in finding spouses and opportunities to work on their own view of family life and partnership.

The attachment theory could bring comfort for the single mothers if it would be interpreted in the way that a child needs only one parent to attach to. But a father's role in the life of a child has also been stressed during the last decades. Intensive parenting sees children as vulnerable to risks and the fatherlessness is seen as a risk to the children's emotional development. However, this kind of thinking causes worries among the single mothers. The interviewed mothers were worried about how the fatherlessness might affect their children in the future as well as how to deal with the fatherlessness of their children.

Many of them struggle with a difficult relationship to the father of their children. Fathers were described as not motivated to build relationships with their children. Mothers on the other hand were expected to help build relationship between the children and their fathers. Sinkkonen said that it is the fathers' personal choice if they would want to commit to their children or not. (Sinkkonen 2003, p. 262) On the other hand it is the mothers' responsibility to persuade men to take responsibility of their children. (Vuori 2003, p. 55,57) The interviewed mothers wished that the society could support them in communicating with the fathers and in demanding the fathers to take bigger roles in their children's lives. Professionals working with families could also expect more from the fathers and contact them more often starting already during the pregnancy. Mothers could benefit from the scientific knowledge on the effects of fatherlessness and from the discussions on how to deal with fatherlessness with their children as well as how to handle the

relationship with the father of their children. These could be good topics for future studies as well.

Familism has stressed the father's role as having responsibility for the family`s economy. The Finnish family policy is also built partly on the new familistic thinking. The new familism encourages mothers to take care of their children at home if they choose to do so and the cash-for-care policy approves it as a good motherhood principle. The attachment theory emphasizes the satisfaction and enjoyment that the motherhood brings to the mothers. The interviewed women expressed that the motherhood is a gift and it gives meaning to their lives. The time spent with their children was more appreciated than having a good economy even though intensive, and expensive, parenting is the ideal parenthood in the Finnish society. (Hays 1996) The mothers may not be encouraged enough to appreciate a good economy and its positive effects on their children as it has been the responsibility of the fathers to provide for the family.

The interviewed mothers, however, compared their roles to those of the ideal parenthood and were worried about their economic condition. These single mothers were very aware of the lack of resources available to their children. Even though most of the single mothers considered their economic status as poor, the mothers with school-age children worried more about their economic situation. They make do with a low income by saving, buying secondhand products and by getting clothes and food from charity. They prioritize using money for the needs of their children instead of using it for themselves. These coping strategies tell us how the low income limits their participation and reduce their capabilities to function in society. (Gubrium & Pellissery 2016, p. 4-5)

The interviewed mothers experienced that the family policy supports them in their financial situation and wellbeing. They were thankful for all the financial support they received, and shared that the single mothers could take care of their children at home if they preferred to do so. Finland appears to have succeeded in giving a free choice to all the parents to decide on how they would want to take care of their children. However, the mother's choices in a family could lead it into the risk of poverty. The society should not only encourage the employment of the mothers but also give the mothers the right to work part-time and to work with flexible working hours. (Esping-Andersen 2002, p. 32,36-39) The mothers mentioned social life and career as their motivations to work. Economic status was mentioned only a few times. The interviewed

mothers wished also to have more economical support from the society. If we consider the family policy as a future investment for the children, then it is important to support the single mother families economically. Financial support gives children a better material living standard or helps them directly by helping their parents have less worries. (Sandbæk & Grødem 2009, p. 194-196)

The single mothers' position in the society has improved significantly after the 1960s (Nätkin 2003, p. 32) But this does not mean that it is trouble-free to be a single mother in the society today. The interviewed mothers worried about their family being different than the majority of the families. They had been accused, pitied, silenced and were even separated from the others for being single mothers. In the interviews the mothers were unanimous in saying that it is an act of injustice to accuse them because they are the ones who carry the responsibilities for their children. When working with the single mothers, we need to remember that they hear and see everything through the experience of being an exception to the norm of the nuclear families. It is important for the workers to be aware of their own prejudices and understand the position of the single mothers in the society.

The community of single mothers helped them manage their worries about having a different family model compared to that of the nuclear family. Peer support has been proven to ease the feelings of isolation among these single mothers. (Alsveit, Severinsson & Karlsen 2010, p. 116-117) The interviewed mothers got to share their worries with their friends and other single mothers. In these peer support groups the mothers also got to learn from the experiences of the others in addition to sharing their feelings with one another. (Eronen 2020) The family work that is targeted at single parents was significant support for the interviewed mothers. For some of them it was the only form of support they received.

Most of the worries of the single mothers had to do with the loneliness: shouldering parental responsibilities alone, emotional loneliness, low income leading to non-participation, and social exclusion with the feeling of being different as single parent surrounded by the nuclear families in the society. Solution to loneliness is inclusion and participation. We need to include the single mothers into the society by making sure that family policies see their family equal to the nuclear families and by making it possible for the single mothers to attend work life in flexible ways. We need to make sure that all the mothers receive social support, whether it is with the help of the

grandparents, friends, family workers or through the support families. Inclusion is the right attitude in the everyday lives of the society no matter how small it may appear to be. It is like lending a hand in putting on the winter clothes on the children in a social welfare office or giving a hug to a tired mother who is doing her very best in raising the next generation.

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Appendix 1. **Informed Consent**


**Suostumus tutkimushaastatteluun osallistumisesta ja haastattelun arkistoimisesta**

Haastattelu järjestetään Saara Andersenin Pro gradu –tutkielmaa varten, jossa pyritään tuomaan esille suomalaisten yksinhuoltajien käsityksiä äitiydestä ja vanhemmuuden tuesta. Tutkimusta varten järjestetään 2-3 hengen ryhmähaastatteluja, joissa keskustellaan kolmesta teemasta: äitiydestä, yksinhuoltajuudesta sekä vanhemmuuden tuesta.  Haastateltava voi itse päättää, miten paljon hän haluaa jakaa omia kokemuksiaan ryhmässä. Tässä haastattelussa voi puhua myös yleisesti yksinhuoltajien äänellä ja kertoa tuttujen kokemuksia.  Haastelluilla on mahdollisuus lukea tutkimusraportti. Tutkimusraportti esitetään OsloMet –suurkaupunkiyliopistossa Oslossa sekä mahdollisesti muualla.

*Haastateltava täyttää*

Haastateltavan nimi:

*Haastattelija täyttää*

Haastattelijan nimi:

Haastattelun tunnus:

Haastattelupaikka ja -aika:

Haastattelut ovat luottamuksellisia. Haastattelutilanteessa haastattelut nauhoitetaan tutkimustyön sujuvoittamiseksi. Tutkimusraportit sisältävät suoria lainauksia haastatteluista tunnistetiedot tutkimuseettisten ohjeiden mukaisesti poistettuina. Haastatteluaineistot tuhotaan tutkimuksen valmistumisen jälkeen.


Suostun haastatteluun ja hyväksyn yllämainitut ehdot.


_____

Paikka ja päivämäärä

_____

Haastateltavan allekirjoitus

Appendix 2. **Haastattelukysymyksiä: / Interview questions**

Teema 1. Äitiys / Motherhood

1. Millaisia ajatuksia äitiys teissä herättää? / What kind of thoughts do you have about motherhood?

Mahdollisia tarkentavia kysymyksiä: / More specific questions if needed:

- Millaista on olla äiti? / How is it to be a mother?
- Mitä äitiys antaa teille? Mikä on antoisaa äitiydessä? / What does motherhood give to you?
- Mikä on kuormittavaa tai haastavaa äitiydessä? / What is challanging in motherhood?
- Mitä ajattelet kotiäitiydestä ja työssäkäyvästä äidistä? / What do you think about a working mother and a mother that takes care of children at home?

Teema 2.  Yksinhuoltajuus / Single parenthood

1. Te osallistutte yksinhuoltajille suunnattuun perhetyöhön. Millaisia ajatuksia yksinhuoltajuus teissä herättää? / You are attending family work that is directed towards single parents. What kind of thoughts do you have about single parenthood?

Mahdollisia tarkentavia kysymyksiä: /Specific questions if needed:

- Millaista on yksinhuoltajan arki? / How would you picture the every day life of a single parent?
- Mitä yksinhuoltajuus vaatii teiltä?  / What does single parenthood require from you?
- Mitä yksinhuoltajuus antaa teille? / What does single parenthood give to you?

Teema 3. Tuki vanhemmuuteen / Parental support

1. Miten teidän mielestänne vanhemmuutta voi tukea? / How is it possible to support motherhood?

2. Millaista tukea olette itse saaneet äitinä? / What kind of support have you received as mother?

   Mahdollisia lisäkysymyksiä: / Specific questions if needed

- Mistä äiti saa voimia arkeen ja vanhemmuuteen?/ How do you get strenght for every day life and motherhood?
- Millainen sosiaalinen verkosto teillä on? Saatko heiltä tukea vanhemmuuteen? / How does your social network look like? Do you get support for parenthood from your social network?
- Miten tämä perhetyö tukee vanhemmuutta? / How does family work directed towards single parents supports parenthood?
- Kun juttelee muiden yksinhuoltajien kanssa, niin saako siitä tukea vanhemmuuteen? Miten se tukee vanhemmuutta? / Whan you talk to other single parents, does that support your parenthood and if, how?
- Jos maailmassa kaikki olisi mahdollista, niin millaista tukea haluaisit äitinä? / If all things would be possible, what kind of support would you like to receive as a mother?

Appendix 3. **Privacy Notice**

1. Identity and contact information of the data controller: Saara Andersen, s336492@oslomet.no

2. Contact details of the data protection officer: Katja Repo, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tampere

3. The purpose for processing personal data: to accomplish master's thesis -research about single mothers` worries.

4. Legal basis for processing personal data: Consent of the research participants. Participants have the right to withdraw their consent to participate in the research anytime. Special categories of personal data, such as racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religion or philosophical beliefs, data concerning health, or sexual life or orientation, are used only on basis on participants explicit consent.

5. Your personal data are not used for automated decision-making or profiling. Providing personal data is not required on statutory or contractual grounds, or on the grounds of concluding a contract. Not providing the data does not have any consequences for you.

6. Information relating to the transfer of personal data: Personal data of participants will be handled only by the researcher. Personal data won`t be transfers to third parties and they won`t be transferred outside of the EU/EEA to third countries or international organizations.

7. All personal data will be removed from the research data in the process of transcription. When the research is finished all data and personal data will be destructed.

8. You have the right to access your personal data, to have inaccurate personal data rectified, to restrict the processing of your personal data, and to object to the processing of your personal data. In connection with scientific research, restriction of said rights is possible in accordance with national legislation. It is possible to complain to supervising authority: tietosuoja.fi, tietosuoja@oam.fi