



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 2017-0034

Project manager: Maarja Saar

Project title: Livelihood strategies and sense of control/agency among Estonian single mothers

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project was to explore livelihood strategies which Estonian single mothers in Estonia versus Nordic countries use

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

I would like to instead discuss two main ideas which the project contributed with. The first result, quite unexpectedly was instead of social protection, related to how single mothers reflected on being a single mother in neoliberal Estonia. This led me and my coauthor to explore how neoliberalizaion in private sphere has been described previously. What became evident was that most research on neoliberalism focuses on public sphere and more so, how masculine subjects engage with neoliberal discourses and practices. If women are described in the context of neoliberalism, the focus is mostly on middle class Western women. This research has resulted in concepts such as 'cupcake feminist' and 'yummy mummy'. Mostly this research focuses on the ways these middle class women present their successes to the world. However, what happens if you are in a role which is perceived societally negatively as single mothers are in Estonia? How do these women deal and negotiate with societal expectations which although subtly, might indicate that they have failed?

What we found that the four key topics emerged in exploring how Estonian single mothers dealt with neoliberal ideals. First, they felt the pressure to live up to societal ideals. They were both critical and at the same time accepting of these ideals. For instance, one single mother describes how for a while she was always embarrassed to go out because she did not have time to apply make-up or money to buy expensive clothes. Yet she felt the societal pressure to do all these things and even felt the judgement from other people if she failed on it. Estonian single mothers that had moved to Nordic countries were much more critical of these ideas. For instance on single mother describes how she would probably have big issues with her child if she was still living in Estonia, because the child has autism and ADHD. She reflects on how Estonian society is very much centered towards success and performance, even when it comes to children. Therefore, whoever fails to preform, gets in a way, kicked out of the system.

The second topic that emerged was how Estonian single mothers held themselves responsible. Instead of turning to the state of their ex-partners, these single mothers took pride in being able to manage on their own. Asking alimony from ex-partners was often painted as a shameful act. Some of these mothers also reflected on the dominant societal attitudes which they found to be favorable to men in the shape of society feeling sorry for the men who have to pay alimony.

The third topic that emerged was how these single mothers handled their relationship. It was quite common for the single mothers that were coparenting to take the lead on planning the schedule, accommodating to one's partner even if he canceled the last minute etc. Furthermore, this responsibility was often seen as natural by the people closest to them who also toned that there should be an appreciation towards the fact that their ex



partner is willing to take care of the children once in a while. Furthermore, many single mothers also described how even during the relationship they were taking the leading role in not only tasks which were 'traditionally considered feminine' but also on several other things, whereas their men mostly focused on work and did not take part much in family life. Furthermore, women also described how it had mostly been their role to maintain the relationship whereas their ex-partners were quite reluctant.

Finally, the women showed signs of having a dialogue with 'masculinity' in neoliberal society. Single mothers reflected on for instance different ways that men and women dealt with the breakup. Often times Estonian single mothers turned into self-development etc., whereas men were seen as dealing with the breakup mostly through material assets, such as acquiring a new car etc. This construction of self-image as being more oriented towards self-actualization helped Estonian women to find an identity which worked in neoliberal Estonia.

Exploring how neoliberalism functions in a private sphere is relatively new topic and hopefully, which this project has shown, an important topic. The previous research has, as mentioned, mostly in terms of women and neoliberalism in the private sphere, focused on middle class coinhabiting women. The 'other kinds of women' however, as our article suggests, might have a more conflicting relationship towards neoliberal ideology. This means that groups such as Estonian single mothers might on one hand acknowledge the norms and try to live up to them, such as pressure to look good and to be successful, but on the other hand they were also critical of some societal expectations and felt that they were unable to adequately live up to these ideals.

Furthermore, an interesting topic is how these single mothers perceived their own as well as their ex-partners' roles under neoliberalism. It is suggested that both sides had internalized neoliberal ideals – just in a different manner. Men were presented as being oriented towards material and career success and described as irresponsible in the private domain. On the other hand, single mothers portrayed themselves as capable of handling all life's challenges. This aligns with McRobbie's (2009) findings about young middle-class women in neoliberal conditions.

The other main finding relates to the dichotomy between staying put and leaving. Many Eastern European countries have experienced a steady population outflow. The most researched question has so far been, why does one migrate or what resources one needs in order to migrate. This project has lifted up instead the question, what resources does one need in order to stay?

Even though there has been an increased focus on problematizing staying, most of the research on staying focuses on rural communities and not on those that have decided not to move internationally (Preece, 2018).

As such Estonian countryside as well as poorer urban population thus resembles the familiar scene of rural communities in many Western countries. This is the population that feels abandoned by politicians and especially rural communities have witnessed a slow, but persistent decay after the collapse of Soviet Union. The difference however is that many people from rural Estonia do not decide to move to Estonian cities, but rather go to neighbouring Finland. The migration corridor between Estonia and Finland has the highest traffic in Europe in terms of the population size of both countries. The typical family model in many Estonian rural communities is that of a husband working in Finland and wife and children staying in Estonia. Such model for livelihood then allows for certain member of the family to stay put via migration of the other member. However, what happens with families which do not have a man as a breadwinner?

Much of the literature so far has been describing moving as a sign of agency, whereas staying is seen as non/action. Some of the scholars have now started to challenge the idea of staying as non/agentive by suggesting that staying also requires agency and might in fact be a conscious decision which is made multiple times throughout one's life. For instance Ye (2018) suggests that that people who decide to stay put, using rural communities in China as an



example, often have complex life strategies such as multiple job holding, but also having one family member to migrate in order to enable others to stay.

Another aspect to take up in relation to mobility and immobility, which has been mainly overlooked by previous literature is the class question. Van Hear (2014) makes a valid point in terms of the relevance of different kind of capitals for moving, by insisting that economic capital might not always been most important, as the lack of it could be buffered by cultural or social capital. The same point, however, could also be turned around to apply for stayers by stating that staying as well, might require different kinds of capitals. This point then allows us to look at the strategies of the stayers from a more informed perspective.

When it comes to Estonian single mothers, four different groups could be distinguished: movers, temporary movers, ambivalent and stayers. Various aspects can be taken up in relation to these groups. The first point is that the aspect of class was relevant in understanding both their ability to stay as well as strategies used in order to stay. For instance, single mothers with limited economic resources often used the help of social capital by relying on their families for survival. However, single mothers who lacked both social and economic capital were often forced to move, albeit reluctantly. In general then, not only the ability to move is defined by the presences of various capitals, but also sometimes the ability to stay put. The article hence calls for more comprehensive analysis of the effects different types of capitals have both on mobility as well as staying put.

Another point that can be made in relation to Estonian single mothers and their ability to stay put is the fact how in the conditions of neoliberal market economy the idea of the insecure labor market is to the degree internalized and alternative strategies for dealing with it are sought. Therefore, moving abroad, was for several staying single mothers considered as bigger of risk than staying, because of the presence of strong social capital in Estonia. This relates to wider political debates on welfare state governance in Estonia. Whereas Estonian single mothers did not move abroad because they were expecting to experience a more generous welfare state, the lack of state provided support dominated many interviews. Both single mothers living in Estonia as well as the ones having moved to Scandinavian countries expressed their feeling of lack of formal social support in Estonia.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The contributions have been partially taken up already under the main result. The idea with both main ideas – the one about staying put as well as about exploring doing neoliberalism in private sphere, was to take the predominant theories in the field and use them in an innovative way. As mentioned, there is little research on strategies which are employed by people to stay put, especially in the context of international migration. Class as well has been mostly ignored by previous research on migration. Therefore, exploring the interlinkages of class and the ability to either migrate or stay put brings potentially new material to the current research.

Furthermore, exploring how neoliberalism pans out in private life, especially how it is enacted by a vulnerable group such as single mothers, also adds new data to the ongoing research. There is a need to acknowledge that neoliberal market logic does not only have an effect on how the public sphere functions, but also impacts our identities and practices. How neoliberalism impacts gender roles enacted is an exciting question worth exploring further.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

One of the interesting questions for the follow-up project could be to explore how the former partners of single mothers describe their relationship and their role.



Another interesting question would be to explore closer the identities of cross-border commuters between Estonia and Finland.

Finally, it would be also worth investigating the life of 'those left behind', how has the migration of mostly men impacted the livelihood in Estonian rurality?

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Several trends noted in this research can be applied to the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the countries in this region are now experiencing a rapid change in gender roles. Single motherhood is the highest in Central and Eastern European countries. Many of these countries have also experienced a steady outflow of people.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Saar, M., & Aavik, K. (2021, to be published). "Negotiating neoliberalism in the private sphere: narratives of Estonian single mothers". *Journal of Baltic Studies*.

Saar, M. (2020). "Diaspora Policies, Consular Services and Social Protection for Estonian Citizens Abroad." In Ed. Lafleur, J.-M. & Vintila, D. *Migration and Social protection in Europe and beyond: a focus on Eu sending states* (Vol. 2). Pp. 161- 172. Springer Open Access, IMESCOE Research Series.

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-51245-3>

The other publications are still under review and have not therefore been included to this list.