

# **TOVE SAMZELIUS**

## **A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF SILENT EXCLUSION**

Family homelessness and poverty in Sweden  
from a single-mother perspective



**A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF SILENT EXCLUSION:  
FAMILY HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY IN SWEDEN FROM A  
SINGLE-MOTHER PERSPECTIVE**

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*Not everything that is faced can be changed,  
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

James Baldwin



# ABSTRACT

Within the confines of the receding Swedish welfare state, family homelessness and poverty are on the rise among one-parent families, in particular those headed by a single migrant mother. This development follows a trend that is noticeable across advanced welfare states, where female-headed households are facing an increased risk of being locked into vicious circles of low-paid work, inadequate income protection schemes and poor housing options.

Contextualized against a wider global political-economic backdrop of rising inequalities and structural changes that take localized forms, this thesis investigates family homelessness and poverty in Sweden through what is referred to as a 'single-mother perspective'. This is an approach where welfare policy and political-institutional arrangements are analysed through the lens of everyday experiences and struggles conveyed by marginalized single mothers. By placing the ideas and experiences of single mothers at the centre of the analysis, the intention is to invoke a different epistemology concerning what type of knowledge is represented and recognised in public. Drawing on insights from critical social theory and feminist ethnographic research, the study uses an approach to the development of new poverty knowledge, found at the junction between lived experience, activism, empirical research and social theory.

The thesis departs from the experiences of homelessness and poverty as articulated by the research participants rather than from official definitions and categories. The findings suggest that unwarranted pain and suffering are caused by insufficient incomes, inadequate housing options, and a failure of public authorities to recognise the degree to which policies in the areas of housing, social security, employment, migration and child welfare intersect in complex ways in the lives of disadvantaged single mothers. The narratives shared by the informants further put into question the image of Sweden as an inclusive 'women- and child-friendly'

welfare state that protects vulnerable citizens from destitution. Instead, the study concludes that the misrecognition and misrepresentation of the living conditions and hardships facing vulnerable mothers and children, combined with a maldistribution of resources, contribute to a vicious circle of silent exclusion.

Finally, the study suggests that although it is the women and children who bear the brunt of this crisis and who feel it the most, its causes and consequences infest the whole fabric of society. It also warrants a return to fundamental ethical questions with regard to how people in poverty are viewed and treated and with regard to the role of solidarity within the welfare state. In particular, it argues that there is an urgent need to re-consider the role of social work practice within the receding welfare state and to scrutinize the impact of conditional welfare on vulnerable clients. The thesis ends by proposing a framework for a 'politics of the heart' that encompasses the pursuit of social justice and an ethics of care that recognises that the empowerment of mothering and motherhood needs to be at the centre of policy and practice that engage with single mothers suffering from poverty and homelessness, as this also tends to be 'in the best interest of the child'.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

BOPP	Bristol One Parent Project
CSN	The Swedish Board of Student Finance (Centrala studiestödsnämnden).
CPAG	Child Poverty Action Group
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EU	European Union
ETHOS	European Typology of homelessness and housing exclusion
FEANTSA	The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
NBHW	National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen)
NBHBP	National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
SCB	Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån)
SHIS	Trust for temporary accommodation in the city of Stockholm (Stiftelsen Hotellhem i Stockholm).
SPAN	Single Parent Action Network
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
VAW	Violence Against Women



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# PROLOGUE

Like millions of people around the world, as I am writing the last words of this thesis I am confined to my home most of the time due to the Corona pandemic. When the leaders of the world are telling their countries' citizens to stay at home, the question of what those without a home should do is asked more frequently. How can families and individuals living in overcrowded conditions protect themselves from the virus? What happens to those families that are forced to share kitchens and toilets in emergency accommodations? The accelerating inequalities in Sweden over the past decades are thrown into the open. It is not only the living conditions, but also the working environments of those that are at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, that are suddenly in the spotlight. The issues are brought to light, but how they will be addressed once this period is over is yet to be known.

Parallels are frequently drawn to the Spanish flu that ravaged the world 100 years ago. Back then it was also workers and those that were poor that were most at risk of succumbing to the disease. Another parallel, less spoken about but no less important, was the housing crisis facing Sweden (and many other countries) at the time. It was the final thrust of an era that led to economic turmoil and war, but that also laid the foundation for the development of the post-war welfare state. To address the poor housing conditions of the most disadvantaged and to stop the spread of disease were some of the key objectives of its architects. When, where and how should the state intervene to ensure that its citizens enjoy a reasonable standard of living? What is our moral duty to vulnerable members of society? How can we best combat the ills of poverty? What is the basis for 'a good society'? These were questions debated back then and that continue to be relevant today.

In September 2019, I presented some of the early findings from this research at a conference organised by FEANTSA, a European umbrella organisation that works on issues related to housing and homelessness. The conference took place in Hel-

singborg – the city where I was born and that members of my family migrated to at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the countryside to take up work in factories. My great-grandmother Kristina worked in a rubber factory situated close to the port, which was the largest employer in the city, also of women. Today, the old rubber factory has been transformed into a university campus and offices. It was here that the conference took place.

Although Kristina was working, she was unable to secure a home for the five of her nine children still living with her. They became one out of many families that the city put up in emergency accommodation just after the Spanish flu took its last lives. Their new residence was a room in barracks that had previously housed patients from the epidemic hospital. The barracks were described by the local press as ‘a shame for the city’, because, even for the time, the living conditions were dire. In the 1930s, those barracks were removed, while other similar temporary housing constructions were burnt down to the ground by the fire brigade.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, more modern housing was erected also for those who belonged to the lower echelons of society. At the end of her life, my grandmother lived in a modern one-bedroom flat with a balcony overlooking the old rubber factory where her mother once worked.

I have often found myself thinking of my grandmother and the conditions under which she was growing up during the course of this research. Her and her siblings’ childhoods marked their entire lives – who they became and what they were able to do. It impacted both their physical and their mental health. Some of my grandmother’s siblings had been put in children’s homes as a consequence of their poverty and insecure housing conditions. These homes would later become known for the abuse afflicted on children in their care. Just like today, many members of the middle- and upper classes were unaware of how ‘the other half lived’ until they were forced to face this reality head on. The barracks that were once ‘a shame for the city’ are gone, but new forms of inadequate housing arrangements are emerging across Sweden, often out of sight for those yet to become aware of their existence. A new generation of children are deprived of the security of a place to call home. How will it affect their lives? How will it affect Swedish society?

As the Corona pandemic is enveloping our lives, we are increasingly being told by people in power that our lives are intertwined. This was also a realisation often reiterated to me by the mothers that took part in this research, long before politicians

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<sup>1</sup> The history of emergency housing in the city of Helsingborg is described in the city’s online historical archives: <https://stadslexikon.helsingborg.se/ndbostder/>

and people paid to have opinions began to reflect on this side of the human condition in public. Indeed, as expressed by one of the mothers:

For my children to have a good situation, my situation has to be good too. When we are all in a good situation we also have a good relationship. But if I don't feel well, my children will suffer. If parents and children are not feeling well this is not good for society either...long-term...it is all part of the same whole...it is related...how we feel and wider society.

If we are all part of this whole, how do we build a common future? What questions do we need to ask? What contradictions do we need to address? What would need to change? Many things are different to when my grandmother was a little girl, but some basic needs remain the same. One of them is the need for an adequate home to be able to flourish and live a life in dignity. How we solve this puzzle will have bearings on the whole, not just its constituent parts.

# INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

I know how I live now and it is not okay. There are so many in the same situation, but if we are silent I think it is dangerous for the whole country. Somebody has to say something. This is why I talk. Somebody has to talk. The truth has to come to the fore. People need to know what is going on, what happens to us. If it continues like this, it is not just about us, it is not good for Sweden as a country.

*Yasmin, mother of three children*

This is a thesis about human suffering and institutional arrangements that contribute to pain and injustice. It is also an account of everyday coping, survival and caregiving in the face of adversity. Yasmin is one of seventeen single migrant mothers who have shared their experiences of housing exclusion and homelessness in greater Stockholm with me. The experiences shared by these women are at the centre of an analysis in which the growing occurrence of family homelessness and housing exclusion is situated as an outcome of gendered and racialized class relations,<sup>2</sup> where the most vulnerable families are insufficiently safeguarded by a receding welfare system. Although each individual story is unique, collectively they shed light on the structural contradictions and unjust social arrangements that shape the lives of marginalized single mothers and their children in the midst of the Swedish welfare state. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) once wrote that ‘public issues’ are reflected in the lives of individuals and their ‘private troubles’. The opposite is also

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I draw on a feminist understanding of class, as articulated by (among others) the American sociologist Joan Acker (2006), whose theory of class is outlined as a set of gendered and racialized processes in which people have unequal control over, and access to, resources necessary for provisioning and survival, something which is intimately tied to the capitalist economic system.

true. The everyday lives of families in poverty, their struggles to find secure housing, and their experiences of interactions with social services and other institutions, do not only say something about their ‘private troubles’ but can also tell us something of significance about the society and the era in which we are living.

In the late 1990s, a group of prominent Swedish welfare scholars wrote an article entitled *The flight from universalism* (Sunesson et al. 1998). The Swedish financial crisis had paved the way for fundamental changes to the welfare system, which they argued could have potentially far-reaching transformative consequences for the Swedish model. One of their key concerns was that the move towards a selective or residual welfare system endangered the ‘classic alliance between women and the welfare state’ (p. 19). New forms of selectivity were noticeable in all layers of the welfare system. Sune Sunesson and his colleagues also argued that a shift in burdens from universal social security and insurance-based welfare onto local means-tested systems was leading to a ‘re-stigmatization of unemployment’.

In what way was the ‘classic alliance between the welfare state and women’ ultimately affected? In this thesis, I argue that one way of finding out is by looking at the living conditions of the most disadvantaged single mothers, who, despite Sweden’s image as a ‘women-friendly’ welfare state, continuously have been identified as a group insufficiently safeguarded by the general welfare system (Salonen 1993; Scheffer Kumpula 2000; Gähler 2001; Fritzell, Gähler & Neramo 2007; Stranz & Wiklund 2012). The vulnerability and the risk of poverty among single mothers have further increased since the fiscal crisis that hit Sweden in the 1990s (Salonen 2019). Sweden’s restructuring and retrenchment of public support systems and universal benefits, coupled with a malfunctioning housing market, appear to have made it increasingly difficult for the most marginalized single mothers to uphold an acceptable basic standard of living. Through the narratives of Yasmin and the other mothers that have shared their experiences with me, political, economic and practical issues that can be related back to both structural changes and institutional arrangements, as discussed by Sunesson and his colleagues over twenty years, come to the forefront.

Why is it important to gain a better understanding of the living conditions of the most disadvantaged single mothers? A key argument raised in social research is that their experience as a group may serve as a ‘litmus test’ for how well the social policy system is operating and ‘offer an early warning of adverse impacts when policies change’ (Burström et al. 2010, p. 919). From a similar position, but with an emphasis on the strength or weakness of social rights for women with children, Barbara Hobson once argued that:

...solo motherhood is the reflector or rear-view mirror for the dynamics of power and dependency [...] From this standpoint, the kinds of state support solo mothers can receive can be employed as a barometer of the strength or weakness of the social rights of women with families (1994, p. 176).

Importantly, the situation facing disadvantaged single mothers and their children can also say something about how effective a welfare state is in protecting women and children from the impact of poverty.

Already at the end of the 1980s, the American scholar Nancy Fraser argued that 'social-welfare struggles should become more central for feminists' (1987, p. 103). She predicted that battles over social spending would soon come to dominate national politics in every late-capitalist welfare state in Western Europe and North America. Women, Fraser said, comprised the overwhelming majority of social-welfare programme recipients and employees, and therefore they would become the main victims of what some analysts had dubbed 'the coming welfare wars'. Fraser concluded that this would lead to what Diane Pearce (1978) once referred to as the 'feminization of poverty'. Single mothers, in particular those with weak material and social capital, would be hit the hardest.

In Sweden, feminist legal scholars and economists have raised similar concerns for some time (see e.g. Gunnarsson 2003; Wennberg, 2008; Gunnarsson 2013). A key concern among these writers is that the strong dual-earner and dual-carer ideal through which equality is assumed to be achieved serves to conceal the structurally disadvantaged position of single mothers (Wennberg 2013; Roman 2018). Furthermore, while the Swedish welfare model has been characterized by general principles of solidarity and public responsibility, recently a more liberal legal framework has been introduced where anti-discrimination and individual right claims are becoming increasingly important. Coupled with ideological ideas underpinning new welfare discourses which focus on individual responsibility, the material component of gender inequality is at risk of being pushed to the back. Not all women are able to participate, be independent and be active agents of choice, due to material constraints. If welfare models do not take this into account, the risk of poverty among women, in particular single mothers, will increase. As long as society is structured by gender with gendered inequalities, Wennberg argues, restrictive measures in social security law 'risk intensifying existing inequalities related not only to gender, but also to ethnicity and social class' (2008, p. 365).

Tackling women's poverty and risk of homelessness is also critical to the long-term success in improving the life chances of children (Women's Budget Group 2005). However, concerns have been raised that the discursive separation between children's poverty and that of their parents risks contributing to making the structural causes of poverty less visible (see e.g. Lister 2006; O'Brien & Salonen 2011; Reynaert & Roose 2017). Child poverty discourses sometimes separate mothers from children, thus obscuring the gendered nature of both poverty and caregiving. Instead, such discourses might 'encourage a response motivated by pity for the helpless child alongside a mentality of blaming adults/mothers; and [...] displace women's issues generally and women's poverty specifically' (Lister 2006, p. 328). To counter this conflict of interests, some commentators have argued that there is a need for a gendered social justice agenda that transcends the public-private divide, coupled with a children's rights agenda, as a way of overcoming the displacement of the rights of one group over the other (Henricson & Bainham 2005).

In this study, I argue that contemporary accounts of poverty in Sweden tend to underestimate the degree to which policies in the areas of housing, social security, employment and child welfare intersect in complex ways in the lives of single mothers and their children (see e.g. Murphy 2019; Watt 2018; Lewis 1997). The increasing number of female-headed households that suffer from homelessness and housing exclusion in Sweden follows a trend which has been noticeable across the Western world for some time (Murphy 2019; Baptista 2019; Bretherton 2017; Mayock & Bretherton 2016). It should serve as a warning of adverse impacts of policy changes both in the economic and social spheres. In the US, researchers discussed the emerging 'new homelessness' already in the 1980s and 1990s and argued that it was a result of the convergence of a rapidly declining supply of low-income housing and increasing economic marginality among the near poor and the poor. The root cause of family homelessness, they maintained, could be attributed to economic decline, a restructured housing market and failed social policy (see e.g. Bassuk & Rosenberg 1988; Elliott & Krivo 1991; Timmer, Eitzen & Talley 1994). Today, there is also a growing body of evidence that the experience of homelessness is differentiated by gender (Baptista et al. 2017; Bretherton 2017; Warburton, Whitaker & Papic 2017). Family homelessness is often hidden or concealed, due to a combination of factors, including inadequate institutional response and the informal strategies used by many mothers in their attempts to find shelter (Pleace 2016; Mayock, Bretherton & Baptista 2016; Baptista 2019).

In Sweden, debates about family homelessness have mainly focused on the impact on children, but it remains a phenomenon that is poorly understood (Samzelius 2017; Knutagård et al. 2020). In 2001, a ministerial memorandum about children's

poverty in Sweden stated that between 1,500 and 2,000 children would be affected by an eviction in that year. As a follow-up from this report, the government appointed a special rapporteur to lead a commission that looked into how social services should work with prevention in relation to evictions as well as with support offered to families after an eviction. In 2005, the inquiry concluded that social services alone could not be responsible for homeless families, but that this was an issue that also housing departments and housing companies had to be accountable for (SOU 2005:88). An important observation made at the time was that:

The problem of evictions and homelessness among families with children is not situated in the Social Service Act, but should be looked for within the local implementation of the law, the organisation and methods used by social services, the situation on the local housing market, a lack of recognition of the nature of the problem, and a varied local interest in improving the situation through existing housing policy instruments (SOU 2005: 88, p. 154).<sup>3</sup>

In 2006, another public inquiry looking at the limitations of the welfare state and citizenship was published (de los Reyes 2006). One of the chapters highlighted barriers and exclusionary mechanisms on the Swedish housing market which led to homelessness among families. The emerging problem was no longer evictions, but rather that some families never had the chance to secure a tenancy in the first place. The analysis used empirical data from an evaluation of a three-year project carried out by social services in a district at the outskirts of the city of Stockholm (Nordfeldt 2007). The majority of the families affected were headed by single mothers with a migrant background. A clear pattern of a gendered and racialized nature of homelessness was distinguished. According to the authors, Marie Nordfeldt and Lars-Erik Olsson (2006), housing exclusion should be analysed within a structural context of social processes, which includes international migration, ethnic housing segregation, and emerging gendered and racialized aspects of poverty in a Swedish context. In an article published in *The European Journal of Homelessness*, Nordfeldt (2012) has more recently suggested the need for a dynamic and intersectional perspective that both includes different levels of analysis (structural, institutional and household levels) and allows gender, class and migration parameters to be taken into consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> The author of this thesis has translated all texts and quotes originally published in Swedish into English. See chapter three, for a more in-depth discussion regarding cross-language research.

The research approach used in this thesis is informed and inspired by the insights of critical poverty scholars (see e.g. O'Connor 2001; Lister 2004; Krumer-Nevo 2017; Bray et al. 2019), theories of social justice (Fricker 2007; Fraser 2009) and feminist ethnographic research traditions (see e.g. Smith 1990; Skeggs 1997; De Vault 1999; Craven & Davis 2013). The intention has been to '...produce knowledge with a particular purpose in mind – to provide a rhetorical space where the experiences and knowledges of the marginalized can be given epistemic authority, be legitimated and taken seriously' (Skeggs 1997, p. 38). This is important, I argue, because how we deal with poverty is by default a profoundly political and ethical question. How we see and understand poverty – the conceptualization, definition and measurement of poverty that are favoured – has significant political implications which also have moral and ethical ramifications. Although the importance of structural and moral perspectives is stressed in the rhetoric of policy-makers as well as in the human rights treaties they have signed, the complexity of fighting poverty within contemporary welfare states, coupled with a political quest for easy fixes, far too often results in 'a cult of individualism, fostered by the politics of neoliberalism, that reduces the question of how to achieve social solidarity to a matter of individual effort' (Lorenz 2014, p. 1).

Previous research has showed that, through action or inaction, national as well as local institutions often fail to respond in appropriate or respectful ways to the needs and circumstances of people experiencing poverty-related problems like homelessness (Bray et al. 2019). In Sweden, I argue, this is acutely manifested in the lack of recognition for the extent to which the privation of sustainable housing options is shaping the lives of vulnerable low-income single-mother families (Samzelius 2018; Swärd & Eriksson 2019). Homeless families with children in Sweden often end up in a gap, between services and responsibilities, where no one seems to be accountable (Andersson & Swärd 2007). According to the mothers involved in this study, the lack of secure and adequate housing is the most important issue impeding their and their children's life chances as it has a detrimental knock-on-effect on all other aspects of their lives. Yet, the lack of recognition for their claims and the increased emphasis on 'the individual's responsibility' further accentuate what I refer to as the 'de-responsibilisation' of the Swedish welfare state, where some of its most vulnerable citizens have silently been excluded from accessing resources that are necessary to live a life in dignity.

## **Aim and research questions**

The aim of this thesis is to investigate family homelessness and poverty in Sweden from what I refer to as ‘a single-mother perspective’. This means taking an approach where welfare policy and political-institutional arrangements are analysed through the lens of everyday experiences and struggles conveyed by marginalized single mothers. By placing the ideas and experiences of these mothers at the centre of the analysis the intention is to invoke a different epistemology concerning what type of knowledge is represented and recognised in the areas under study. This approach is informed by political intent as well as theoretical and ethical concerns regarding the fact that people who experience poverty often are denied the status of ‘credibility as knowers’ (Fricker 2007). It is also based on the assertion that when subordinate groups are allowed to define their own situation, it seldom reflects the reality as described by people in more powerful positions (see Smith 1993; Collins 2016a). The *life knowledge* shared by the participating single migrant mothers is central to the study, but it is further complemented with my own and other practitioners’ *practical knowledge* as well as previous theoretical and empirically grounded *academic knowledge* (Krumer-Nevo 2005). It is thus an approach to the development of *new poverty knowledge*, which is found at the nexus of lived experience, activism, empirical research and social theory (O’Connor 2001).

The study is guided by the following questions: What new knowledge about family homelessness and poverty in Sweden is generated through the experiences shared by the research participants? What emerging themes, concerns and power relations come to the fore? When those are situated and analysed within a broader social, economic and political context, what contradictions become visible? How might these contradictions in turn shape the experiences shared by the informants? What are the wider political and ethical implications of the findings?

## **Thesis outline**

The thesis consists of eleven chapters. There is no separate chapter presenting previous studies or other relevant literature, as those are embedded and discussed thematically throughout the thesis.

In the first four chapters, I will frame the research by situating it within a broader theoretical, political and social context. Both the Swedish welfare state and interna-

tional trends will be discussed. I will also describe my epistemological and methodological approach to the topic under investigation.

In this introductory chapter, I have presented the research focus and its aim. This chapter will also contain a discussion of key concepts like single motherhood, migrant, family homelessness and housing exclusion, and a section where I explain my approach to poverty and social injustice. In chapter two, I will introduce my research journey and the framework for my study, which have been driven by both professional and personal experiences in Sweden and the UK. I will also explain why I believe a 'single-mother perspective' can add insights to existing debates about poverty and housing inequality in Sweden. Furthermore, I will discuss the politics of representation and 'the poverty paradox' that exists in contemporary social work.

From here I will move on to chapter three, where I will focus on questions of methodology and ethics. The research participants, both single mothers and professionals, will be introduced before I discuss my positionality as a researcher and what it means to carry out feminist ethnographic research during a political era that places emphasis on 'self-sufficiency' and 'individual responsibility'. Finally, I will describe the methods used in the field, the empirical material, the analysis and the presentation of the findings. In chapter four, I will place the topic of family homelessness within the context of a receding welfare state. In particular, I will emphasise how the restructuring and retrenchment of the Swedish welfare state have impacted on single parents in general, and single migrant mothers in particular. I will argue that, encapsulated in discourses that focus on individuality, choice and autonomy, social policy has failed to pay sufficient attention to the marginalization of vulnerable groups. Instead, a 'welfare vacuum' has emerged, leading to a 'refamiliarization' and a 'de-responsibilisation' of the welfare state.

In the following five chapters, I will move on to a more in-depth presentation of the experiences and perspectives of the single mothers and professionals that have partaken in this study. In chapter five, I will bring attention to income insecurity, focusing on the transitional and precarious nature of different sources of income. I will also discuss the role of debt and the restrictive nature of the Swedish social assistance scheme. In chapter six, I will move on to discuss the barriers facing low-income single mothers in accessing the housing market in metropolitan Stockholm. As regular housing options for low-income families have diminished, new unregulated options on a 'parallel' market are surfacing. This market is characterised by high costs, insecurity, transient arrangements, and a lack of legal rights and entitlements.

In chapter seven, the mothers' experiences of seeking help from social services because of housing emergencies, are explored. As the need for support is on the surge, the responsibility of social services is increasingly contested. Rather than being offered support, my informants describe how they are 'kept out' and pushed to 'exit' the social assistance scheme also when no alternative adequate housing is available. Subsequently, in chapter eight, I will describe what emergency accommodations and temporary housing options offered through social services look and feel like. I will also touch on the 'commodification' of homeless families and how a new market run by middle-men that are in contact with social services has emerged. Finally, in chapter nine, the experiences of mothering under pressure will be deliberated on. The pressure and stress will be described as stemming both from the inadequate living situations and from interactions with social services.

In the final section of the thesis, I will present my conclusions and implications for further research and social policy. Thus, in chapter ten, I will analyse the emerging themes, concerns and power relations within the broader social, political and economic context introduced in the beginning of the thesis and through a lens of social theory, thereby highlighting emerging contradictions and ethical dilemmas. And in the concluding chapter eleven, I will discuss the findings from an ethical and political perspective whilst also highlighting implications for further research and social policy.

## **A note on key concepts**

Concepts like single motherhood, migrant, homelessness, housing exclusion, poverty and social justice are central in this thesis. However, as with all concepts, or categories, they can be interpreted in different ways. In this section, I will briefly introduce how they are understood and used in this study. This will be further developed and discussed in relation to my empirical material throughout the thesis.

### **Single mother/hood**

Despite the commonly used gender-neutral terminology of parenthood in family policy and research, I have decided to use motherhood in this study. This is not only because the participants define themselves as mothers, but also in order to accentuate the deeply gendered nature of a status which in official documents tends to be described as lone parenthood (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado 2018). Despite the strong Swedish ideal of shared parenting and living arrangements for children after a separa-

ration, this is more common among Swedish-born separated parents with higher incomes and education than other groups. There also appears to be a stronger correlation between shared living arrangements and income if the father has a high income. In cases where both parents were born abroad, 77 per cent of the children lived with their mother all the time after a separation, compared to 44 per cent where both parents were born in Sweden. Single mothers who have their children living with them all, or most of, the time, appear more vulnerable. Unemployment is higher and they report more financial difficulties (Statistiska centralbyrån 2014).

I primarily use the term 'single mother' to refer to those mothers that raise one or more of their children while not living in the same household as a father. However, when I quote another author, or refer to official policies, I sometimes use terminology such as single parent, lone parent or solo mother. I do not differentiate mothers who were single when they had their child from those who are separated or bereaved. What it means to be a single mother has changed over time and varies across the single mothers' life course. What it means today is also shaped by social divisions like class, ethnicity, migration history and, of course, the society in which you live. It might also be shaped by cultural background and social status. In a sense, none of the terms commonly used to identify single mothers are satisfactory in their ability to capture family experiences, because they tend to be used as deficit language. In a British context, where I have spent most of my adult life, the term single mother, or single parent, is most commonly used in colloquial language. Although it has been used in a derogatory sense and to differentiate bereaved or divorced parents from those never married, this is how most single mothers on low income would self-identify today, and it is the term I have opted to use.

Motherhood, however, is not just something describing a status or an identity, it is something we do. I will argue that the process of mothering and the bond with the child are central for the understanding of how mothers think, act and try to organise their lives. How this is carried out in practice is shaped by the mother's social location and resources. Motherhood also occurs in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race, gender, class and culture. In chapter two, I will develop this understanding further as I explain my adoption of what I refer to as a 'single-mother perspective' as a central analytical tool. In chapter nine, I will discuss how the notion of motherhood is scrutinized and put under pressure due to different forms of hardship and symbolic aspects of poverty.

## Migrant

In this thesis, I use the term ‘migrant’ rather than the Swedish official category ‘foreign-born’ or the more colloquial ‘immigrant’. Fifteen of the women involved in this research came to Sweden as adults and two came to Sweden as children. All of them were born in, and have ties to, countries in Africa, the Middle East or Central and South Asia. Two women came to Sweden as children, but had lived outside of Sweden in their late teens and as adults before returning. Another two women had spent time outside of Sweden, caring for family. All of the participants had either Swedish citizenship or a settled status with a right to remain legally in Sweden. For the mothers themselves, the migrant experience was often described through the lens of transnationality and transnational social spaces, as captured in the work of the German sociologist Thomas Faist (2000). Transnationality, in this view, should be seen as a process where the degree and the intensity change between individuals and over a life course. It is also dependent on life circumstances. According to Faist, ‘transnational social spaces’ can be defined as:

...relatively stable, lasting and dense sets of ties reaching beyond and across the borders of sovereign states. Transnational social spaces consist of combinations of ties and their contents, positions in networks and organizations, and networks of organizations can be found in at least two geographically and internationally distinct spaces (2000, p. 197).

For women, such ties can be both enabling and constraining. In the context of late modernity, transnationality and transnational social spaces can involve more choice as well as more risk (Mohme 2016). For mothers living in Sweden, leaving a violent or abusive relationship is construed as a choice and an option which might have been more difficult to obtain elsewhere. Nevertheless, it also involves the risk of becoming destitute and of losing ties with friends and family. Furthermore, transnational spaces and identities can enable both altruism and exploitation. The importance of this in the lives of the informants will be further explored in the empirical chapters, as ethnic, religious and linguistic networks sometimes played an important role in their search for housing.

Within the context of Swedish society, the term ‘migrant’ may also imply a racialized<sup>4</sup> identity and a marginalized social position which constitute the individual or group as ‘outsiders’ and subject to the risk of misrecognition and ‘Othering’ (Lister 2004). Since the 1990s, migration scholars have argued that immigrants as a group have become the new ‘undeserving poor’ in the European welfare states (see e.g. Bommes & Geddes 2000; Jørgensen & Thomsen 2016; Jørgensen 2018). Sweden is no exception in this respect (Sahlin 2018). Within such discourses across Europe, the situation of migrant women has largely been either invisible or dramatized (Amelina & Lutz 2018). Critical voices have also been raised against stereotypical images of migrant women which arise from unequal power relations. Such discourses implicitly and explicitly draw a distinction between the supposedly emancipated egalitarianism of the majority society and the so-called patriarchal primacy among migrants and their successor generations, without taking into account other forms of social division (see e.g. Rostock & Berghahn 2008; Kofman, Saharso & Vacchelli 2015).

## Family homelessness and housing exclusion

Family homelessness is a term commonly used to describe when a whole family unit experiences homelessness together, i.e. when parents have dependent children physically living with them. This is to make a distinction between the experience of being a homeless parent whilst caring for a child and the experience of being a parent but having children who live elsewhere. Across Western Europe and North America, households headed by a single mother are over-represented among families that experience homelessness and housing exclusion. Underlying factors frequently mentioned for this over-representation are poverty, domestic abuse, separations and inadequate policy responses. Their homelessness is often ‘hidden’ and invisible in official data, something which is increasingly recognised as a problem by social researchers (Baptista et al. 2017). In this thesis, my point of departure is the experience of homelessness and housing exclusion as articulated by the research participants rather than the official definitions (which will be explained in chapter four). These experiences can be depicted as multiple journeys between different forms of

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<sup>4</sup> I am using the term racialized as a sociological concept linked to a process of racialization. The British sociologist Robert Miles has referred to racialization as ‘those instances where social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities. The concept therefore refers to a process of categorization, a representational process of defining an Other (usually, but not exclusively) somatically’ (Miles 1989, p. 75). For a more detailed discussion regarding this term and its use, see Barot & Bird (2001).

inadequate housing, and as transitions between ‘official’ and ‘hidden’ forms of homelessness over significant periods of time. Whether their situation at a given time fits neatly into the official categories or not, as pointed out by Nicholas Pleace, families ‘staying with family or friends’

... have no legal right to live where they are, and they may be without their own front door or private space which they control, experiencing problems like severe overcrowding and sometimes living in situations where there are safeguarding concerns. If you have no control over your own living space, or privacy and no legal rights saying that somewhere is your home, then you do not have a home, even if there is a roof over your head (2019, p. 22).

This conceptualization of what it means to be without a ‘home’ resonates with that of the European umbrella organisation FEANTSA’s focus on living situations. FEANTSA calls an adequate living situation ‘a home’. Three domains are identified as constituting a home; living situations that are deficient in one or more of these domains are taken to represent homelessness or housing exclusion. These three domains of home are described as:

...having a decent dwelling (or space) adequate to meet the needs of the person and his/her family (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy social relations (social domain); and having exclusive possession, security of occupation and legal title (legal domain) (Edgar 2009, p. 15).

The theoretical categories of homelessness and housing exclusion then translate into the ETHOS typology, which consists of thirteen categories containing twenty-four discrete living situations (FEANTSA 2020). These categories are grouped under four headings: roofless, houseless, insecure and inadequate accommodation. The roofless and houseless categories together define homelessness; insecure and inadequate are categories of housing exclusion. All of the different living circumstances that the informants in this study described fit into these broader categories of homelessness and housing exclusion. They never had a situation that completely fulfilled the criteria of having ‘a home’. In chapter four, I will further discuss how many families with inadequate living situations are defined out of the official homelessness categories in Sweden, and in subsequent chapters I will outline why this is problematic.

## Poverty and social injustice

This thesis takes as its point of departure a theoretical approach sometimes referred to as critical or relational poverty studies, rather than homelessness or housing studies (see e.g. Goode & Maskovsky 2001; O'Connor 2001; Lister 2004; Krumer-Nevo 2005; Pulkingham et al. 2010; Krumer-Nevo 2017; Feldman 2018; Bray et al. 2019). The aim is to accentuate the important link between family homelessness, housing exclusion and wider societal inequalities (see e.g. Farrugia & Gerrard 2016; Desmonds 2016; Sharam & Hulse 2014; Watt 2012). Critical poverty theory adopts a political perspective to understand poverty and place poverty in the context of power relations. Despite the recognition that material hardship is at the core of the experience of poverty, symbolic and relational aspects of poverty are also stressed as important. It is in direct interactions and day-to-day encounters that people feel most deeply the effects of power and powerlessness (see Lister 2004; Krumer-Nevo 2017). As social welfare offices are a central arena for interactions and encounters for many people experiencing poverty, the need to reconnect social work with its political and ethical foundations has been highlighted (see e.g. Featherstone, Broadhurst & Holt 2012; Krumer-Nevo 2017; Cummins 2018).

Poverty is here seen as 'a dynamic social process through which people gain, lose and re-gain access to essential resources and material objects' (Sharam & Hulse 2014, p. 297). Resources are both material and non-material as they refer to capital and labour, legal entitlements and customary rights as well as social constructions that create status hierarchies. Importantly, for people living in poverty, access to resources is often mediated through the assessment of 'deservedness', both in the formal way through institutions like social services, and in more informal discursive ways through prevailing ideas around fairness, solidarity and individual responsibility. Andrea Sharam and Kath Hulse have used these ideas to describe homelessness as a result of processes that lead to destitution. A key element in this process, they argue, is 'the individuation resulting from the loss of key social relations' (ibid.). They also argue that destitution 'can be understood as the outcome of a downward shift in the social order, in which assets are lost, withdrawn or denied; and in which social connections and obligations are weakened or voided' (2014, p. 298). The deterioration in the living conditions of the poor is here regarded 'as a consequence of the actions of the non-poor who derive benefits from these changes' (ibid.).

This is an understanding of poverty that raises fundamental ethical questions regarding our duty as a society towards our weaker members. Building on Fraser's (1989) theory of justice and parity of participation, Ruth Lister (2004) constitutes the struggle against poverty as an integration of the politics of recognition (cultural

and symbolic struggles for justice) with that of redistribution (socio-economic struggles for justice). Drawing on the language used by people living in poverty, Lister has called her approach ‘a politics of redistribution and recognition&respect’ (2004, p. 186). A key concern is the ability of agents and institutions to respond in ways that recognise the needs of people experiencing poverty and that ensure that they are treated with respect. Misrecognition, according to Fraser (1989), is institutionalized throughout the world in a host of laws, government politics, administrative regulations, professional practices and social customs that constitute some categories as less than full members of society. This, in turn, contributes to a maldistribution of resources. Fraser does not write explicitly about poverty, but Lister points at the importance of integrating the issue of poverty within wider contemporary political debates and theorization. In a similar way, David Farrugia and Jessica Gerrard have advocated for ‘moving from the view of homelessness as an extraordinary malfunction [of individuals] to a position embedded within the wider dynamics of contemporary inequality’ (2016, p. 278), and in so doing to locate homelessness within neoliberal governmental strategies including policies that condition welfare, targeting people experiencing poverty and the increased financialization of housing.<sup>5</sup>

Since Lister established her framework, Fraser (2009) has further advanced her theory by incorporating the notion of representation, which I suggest can be linked to the question of epistemic injustice, where a person is wronged in their capacity as a knower, as developed by Miranda Fricker (2006, 2007). Representation in Fraser’s account of justice, is a matter of social belonging. It is about inclusion in, or exclusion from, ‘the community of those entitled to make justice claims on one another’ and who are constituted as ‘deserving’ of redistribution and reciprocal recognition. Thus, somebody whose social experience is not accounted for because they are wronged in their capacity as a knower, is at risk of suffering the effects of misrecognition and maldistribution. Although the different dimensions are intertwined, Fraser points out that it is the political arena that provides the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out. It is here that procedures for staging and resolving challenges in other arenas are set and decided upon, and ‘it tells us not only who can make claims for redistribution and recognition, but also how such claims are to be mooted and adjudicated’ (Fraser 2009, p. 17).

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<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth discussion on housing and financialization, see Manuel B. Aalbers (2016). The link between contemporary inequality and individual experiences is a theme that runs through this thesis, and its relation to global political-economic changes is discussed more in detail in chapter ten.

This resonates with Fricker's (2007) conceptualization of epistemic injustice, which she claims is foundational to other forms of social injustice as it prevents marginalized groups from contesting distorted understandings of their social experiences. This, in turn, can result in what Lister (2004) refers to as the process of 'Othering'.<sup>6</sup> The 'Othering' of people living in poverty often reduces 'the poor' to passive objects. She describes 'Othering' as a 'dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between "us" and "them" – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained' (Lister 2004, p. 101). This is a fundamental feature of what she refers to as relational or symbolic aspects of poverty, which are about lack of voice, denial of human rights and diminished citizenship. It entails feelings of powerlessness, shame, stigma, humiliation and disrespect. 'What makes having one's vulnerabilities exposed and exploited an issue of injustice', argues Vittorio Bufacchi, 'is that injustice tends to augment the power of some at the expense of others, who in their turn experience a waning of their power' (2012, p. 15). In effect, it could be argued that 'what makes injustice both bad and wrong is that victims of injustice, like victims of violence, are humiliated into a state of powerlessness' (Bufacchi 2012, p. 14). How this is played out in the social experiences conveyed by low-income single migrant mothers in Sweden will be further explored in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup> Lister, among others, uses a capital 'O' to denote the symbolic weight of this process. 'Othering', she argues, 'conveys how this is not an inherent state but an ongoing process animated by the "non-poor"' (2004, p. 101).

# INVESTIGATING HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY FROM A SINGLE-MOTHER PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter I will introduce my approach to studying family homelessness and poverty in Sweden from what I refer to as a ‘single-mother perspective’. I will begin by discussing my ‘need to know’, how this has shaped the research process, and the meaning of subjectivity in a research context. I will then describe how the suffering and pain that I witnessed in previous work, became my motive force, or the motivation and driving force for carrying out this study. Then I will outline why I believe a ‘single-mother perspective’ can add to existing knowledge about poverty and housing inequality in Sweden. I will also explain why I believe the granting of epistemic value and authority to those directly affected by poverty and homelessness, is an important step on the way to gaining a deeper experiential understanding of some of the most pressing public issues of our time. After this, I will discuss why ‘the politics of representation’ is a crucial element of the ‘politics of poverty’ as it shapes not only our understanding of poverty, but also our view of those that are at the receiving end of welfare interventions. Finally, I will deliberate on why there is a need to recognise the link between poverty and family homelessness in contemporary Sweden, and how the ‘poverty paradox’ in social work prevents social workers from adapting an enabling approach based on principles of social justice in their practice. The current emphasis on individual deficiencies and responsibilities, thereby risks determining not just how, but to whom resources are distributed and who is seen as ‘worthy’ of assistance in the Swedish welfare state.

## On needing to know

The philosopher Robert Bernasconi (2007) has argued that sometimes ‘the need *not* to know’ can be as strong as ‘the need to know’ when we are not personally affected by the injustice or genuinely interested in fighting it. Consciously, or unconsciously, the power to exclude is used to silence or discredit those who threaten a position of privilege and status. Yet, just as much as ‘the need not to know’ can motivate our actions and cause disregard for certain forms of knowledge, our ‘need to know’ can become our driver and motivation to let new audiences and voices into the discussion, adding an experiential view that can help to broaden our knowledge base. This is important, because as pointed out by Patricia Hill Collins:

We must distinguish between what has been said about subordinate groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves in a given opportunity (1990, p. 374).

However, as researchers, when we speak for others we cannot become them, we can only narrate their experiences. What we can do, however, is to make explicit our reasons with regard to telling people’s stories, and our intentions for the process of participation, interpretation and writing (Griffin 1996). My reasons for seeking to give epistemic authority to marginalized single migrant mothers in Sweden stems from a strong ‘need to know’ influenced by both personal and professional experiences. I therefore believe it is important for the reader to be aware of this position and motivation from the start.

As I disclosed my background of long-term engagement with the UK-based grassroots single-parent-led organisation Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) at the early stages of this research endeavour, I was asked by another academic: ‘Is it possible to be an activist and a researcher at the same time?’ Rather than answering ‘yes’ or ‘no’, however, I think this question needs to be contextualized. What makes us activists, researchers, or indeed interested in a certain topic, is always shaped by some form of experience, whether we make this explicit or not. The question posed by my colleague, however, pinpointed the role played by different paradigms within social sciences. Although a critical approach to social work and science, like the one I propose in this thesis, is common, a positivist paradigm is still dominant in framing practical social work and research that is close to evidence-based practice in Sweden. Our preferred research paradigm will influence our views on activism, subjectivity and knowledge formation.

Thomas Kuhn has defined a paradigm as the ‘entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community’ (1962, p. 175). Within academia diverse paradigms are used to advance knowledge from different perspectives. In my view, different paradigms serve to advance knowledge about the world from different standpoints, which can be both complementary and oppositional. Briefly summarized, positivist social science assumes social reality to be a configuration of orderly, pre-existing social patterns that shape individual human beings and that it is the business of social science to discover. The evidence used to define theory is based on observation and the conditions of the facts are tightly controlled in an effort to ensure that the facts observed by scientists are not confounded by external events or beliefs. Value-neutrality, objectivity and empirical testability are thus seen as key virtues (Neuman 2006). In contrast, critical social science does not assume that ‘neutrality is either possible or desirable’ (Swift 1995, p. 16). A basic assumption is rather that social reality is complex and contradictory by nature. The role of a critical theorist is to uncover these contradictions and try to make them visible.

Drawing on this paradigm, feminist epistemology is, broadly speaking, examining the ‘relations between gender and knowledge, where gender is understood not as an attribute to individuals but rather as an axis of social relations’ (Grasswick 2011, p. xiv). Focusing on power relations and their impact on the production of knowledge, feminist epistemology also accounts for a scope that incorporates other axes of oppression such as race/ethnic, class and social status. One such example is Collins’ account of the development of Black feminist thought, where she argues that what people in subordinate positions say about themselves often differs substantially from what people in more powerful positions say:

Black feminists have questioned not only what has been said about Black women, but the credibility and the intention of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyse reality are entitled to do so (1986, p. 517).

Self-definition and self-evaluation are key themes within Black feminist thought, according to Collins. Self-definition, in this account, involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally defined stereotypical images, while self-evaluation is about the content of these definitions.

Single Parent Action Network, or SPAN as I will refer to the organisation from now on, once developed out of a need for collective activism during a political moment in UK history where single mothers were vilified and stereotyped in public discourse, whilst suffering from institutionalized discriminatory practices. Inspired by Black and working-class feminist thinkers, the welfare rights movement and the British anti-racist debates of the 1980s (see Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1983), SPAN's predecessor Bristol One Parent Project (BOPP) was formed in 1985 to initiate collective action to address the poor housing conditions of many Black and mixed-race single-mother families in inner-city Bristol. Most of the founding members were living in poverty, many with a history of displacement, domestic violence, childhood poverty and discrimination.

SPAN was formed in 1990 to build on BOPP's work and create a national network of multi-ethnic grassroots single-parent-led groups that developed from a place of resistance towards externally defined stereotypical images of single mothers that were living in poverty, and as a way of collectively working to create better living conditions and opportunities for parents and children (Cohen et al. 2017).<sup>7</sup> The aim of the network was declared as follows:

We are against discrimination. Against racism and sexism. Proud of our families. Proud to be parents. Welcome to a network which aims to defend each other's rights and the rights of our children to a positive, loving and fruitful future.<sup>8</sup>

'The personal is political' was once a powerful slogan used by feminist movements to address the connection between the self and the political reality that shapes personal experience. Just like the women who once started BOPP and SPAN, I initially engaged with this organisation out of need and because of the situation I was in at the time. Later it offered me employment which helped me to reconcile work and single motherhood within my local community in inner-city Bristol. Thus, my initial 'need to know' stemmed from my own experience of having to navigate the British welfare system as an EU-migrant single mother. It was also the result of the agony of 'falling through the welfare net' due to my status as a foreign student without the right to maternity pay and housing support. The despair, the rage and the anguish

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<sup>7</sup> The history and legacy of Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) are documented by researchers linked to Bristol University through a participatory history research project 2019-2021. For more information about the project and its outputs, please see <https://www.thespanproject.org.uk>

<sup>8</sup> Unpublished documents outlining the history and stated aims of the group are available through the Feminist Archives South at Bristol University.

that I felt during this time are feelings that I rarely share in public, but they became my driving force for change – for myself and for others. A contact instigated by personal need rather than political intent thus gradually changed over time through what can be described as a process of collective consciousness-making, where my own understanding of the wider barriers facing marginalized single mothers was continuously developed through many years of ongoing dialogue and praxis involving single mothers from a wide variety of ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, educational and class backgrounds. It was thus the combination of personal and professional experiences which determined the path that life and labour have taken me down over the past seventeen years and my continuous reflection on the topics addressed in this study.

### **Subjectivity as a ‘virtue’**

My trajectory is of course not unusual, especially among feminist and critical theorists whose work is also grounded in experience and that has explicit aspirations for social change and engagement. Prominent and well-known scholars like Dorothy Smith, Beverly Skeggs, Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have often reflected on how their experiences outside of academia influenced their approaches to epistemology, ethics and methodology. Lister makes reference to her history of working with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and how this informed her thinking about ‘the importance of incorporating the perspectives of those with experience of poverty into the theorization of and research into poverty’ (2004, p. 2). In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) wrote that we should not disregard the knowledge and experience that we have gathered from a range of different sources. In his view, separating your research from other aspects of your life cuts you off from a major source of insights, hypotheses and validity checks. It may also, as argued by Skeggs, ‘enable us to recognize things that others prefer to overlook’ (1997, p. 19). I would add that it can help to guide us when questioning what others might take for granted. We cannot ignore the things we instinctively notice.

New poverty knowledge, which is not solely concerned with redistribution, should, as pointed out by Alice O’Connor (2001), be based on an acknowledgement of its fundamentally political nature and the recognition and legitimization of knowledge grounded in practice, activism and experience. Through her concept of ‘outsider within’, Collins (1986) once called for a methodology and theory that operate in dialogue with the researcher’s own experiences. In contrast to the idea of

upholding a distance to the research one is conducting, Collins argued that the scholar should bring forth personal as well as cultural biographies of the self into the research, as these are significant sources of knowledge. Hence, adopting a critical approach, whether I self-identify as an activist or not, my knowledge grounded in practice and experience should not be discarded, but could rather be seen as ‘virtuous’. Indeed, as argued by the American education scholar Alan Peshkin when discussing the role of subjectivity in his own research:

The subjectivity that originally I had taken as an affliction, something to bear because it could not be foregone, could, to the contrary, be taken as ‘virtuous’. My subjectivity is the basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do as a researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphases I make in my writing. Seen as virtuous, subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than to exorcise (quoted in Glesne & Peshkin 1992, p. 104).

Being responsible for fundraising, quality assurance, staff well-being and service delivery in a small grassroots charity where you meet women and children that live at the margins of the welfare state on a daily basis, gives you a profound lesson in what the German philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) once referred to as ‘the human condition’ – the practical circumstances of human life. Crucial for our practical experience, according to Arendt, is that it is played out in relationship to other human beings and she accentuates both its plurality and its uniqueness. It is also these insights that have prompted me to draw on literature from different academic fields in this study and to cross disciplinary boundaries in my approach.

During my time at SPAN, I spent much of my time thinking about how we could meet diverse needs, whilst recognising ‘the role of agency at both the individual and collective levels and the importance of context and process’ (Anthias 2001, p. 852). I also had the opportunity to be part of co-produced research together with single mothers and academic colleagues, where we looked at the experiences of the implementation of welfare-to-work policies targeting lone parents in the UK (Cohen et al. 2017; Haux et al. 2012; Giullari 2007). This was an era of welfare reforms in the UK, which involved significant changes in the benefit regime for lone parents, including the introduction of sanctions and mandatory requirements, all of which was unfolding in real time as we were trying to also navigate a changing funding and po-

litical landscape (see e.g. Gregg, Harkness & Smith 2009; Withworth & Griggs 2013; Harkness 2016; Cain 2016; Millar & Bennett 2017; Millar 2019).

One might ask in what way my experience in the UK is relevant to the situation of marginalized single mothers in Sweden. In answer, I would argue that my embodied and practical knowledge from the UK, has helped me to get a ‘comparative grip on the material’ and to look at Swedish policies and practices through a comparative lens. Furthermore, human conditions and basic needs are fundamentally the same across national boundaries, but the political and regulatory systems, as well as the social and cultural norms within which these conditions and needs are played out, might diverge. I also believe that the vast existing literature on this topic produced in the UK and elsewhere can be helpful when asking some fundamental and ethical questions regarding the way welfare conditionality is implemented in Sweden and its impact on families headed by a single mother. In effect, it was the differences *and* similarities between the UK and Sweden that sparked my interest in the topic addressed in this study. Admittedly, before engaging in this research, I had more in-depth knowledge and experience of the British welfare state than of the Swedish one. This has had a significant influence on the questions I have asked and how I have viewed inconsistencies and contradictions identified in my empirical observations and analyses. Those inconsistencies and contradictions have also been key when I have revisited and reframed the theoretical and methodological framework (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007).

## **On the motive force**

I moved back to my native Sweden in 2015, after over twenty years abroad, to take up a job with Save the Children Sweden’s domestic programme. One of my first assignments was to assist with the publication and launch of Save the Children’s yearly Child Poverty report that the organisation had published since 2003 (Salonen 2015). This was when I initially became fully aware of the large differences in poverty rates between children growing up in a household headed by a single parent with a foreign background and children with two parents living together and born in Sweden. In the former group, 53.4 per cent lived in poverty in 2013, and in the latter only 2 per cent (Salonen 2015).<sup>9</sup> I became interested in finding out more about the

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<sup>9</sup> Save the Children Sweden uses two separate measures with a view to using credible durable data, which show children’s and families’ financial conditions over time at the municipal level: low-income standard and social assistance. Save the Children’s

social reality behind the statistics. Why was the poverty rate among children of single migrant parents in Sweden as high as that of children of single parents in the UK, while poverty rates across the board were so much lower? What were the underlying explanatory factors? Having worked for so long identifying barriers to inclusion for marginalized single mothers in the UK, I felt an instinctive ‘need to know’ and to investigate this further. In the UK, welfare rights advocates, feminist activists, academics and policy-makers had turned to Sweden for inspiration and it was in particular the access to affordable wrap-around childcare that was envied. However, the large disparity in poverty rates between different household types in Sweden suggested that this question was more complex (see Cohen & Samzelius 2020; Lister 2009).

Around this time, I was asked to write a memo on how Save the Children could develop its work in the area of child poverty. I was also asked to identify a topic for a report which would ‘give voice’ to children. I reviewed previous Swedish research, read internal reports, spoke to colleagues working in front-line practice, and, listened to parents in Save the Children’s parent support groups. A number of themes surfaced, and the problems caused by a lack of affordable and accessible housing was a prominent one. From a communicative point of view, I thought housing would be a suitable topic, since all children need the security and safety of a home. It was decided that I should write a report on housing exclusion and homelessness. The stated aim of the report was to bring a child perspective to the housing debate. How many children in Sweden were homeless? How did they live and what was their and their parents’ experiences? (Samzelius 2017).

We sent out a questionnaire to Sweden’s 290 municipalities asking them how many children they knew of that were homeless. It proved difficult to get any response and many municipalities got back to us saying they did not have any figures. Finally, we opted for only including municipalities with a population of over 60,000 and received answers from 25 out of 36. Together, they reported having knowledge of 5,390 children that fell into the categories for homelessness as constituted by the

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measures, developed by Tapio Salonen, have come to be widely quoted and used by public authorities and others in Sweden. Both measures can be monitored annually for all households in the country through different agency registers. The advantages of using these two independent measures in a combined index is that they give an in-depth opportunity of consistently monitoring deficiencies in children’s basic financial security. The one measure – low-income standard – directly reflects household finances, while the other – social assistance – is affected by various social policy measures. Expenditure for households with a low-income standard is based on a lowest acceptable level of expenditure based on the social assistance norm set in the mid-1980s (with annual upward adjustments for inflation) and a norm for housing expenditure. If an income is less than the norm for this expenditure (income standard under 1.0) it is defined as ‘low-income standard’. The measure has been developed by SCB (Statistics Sweden) and is used to distinguish, inter alia, families’ financial situation. (Salonen 2002, p. 10).

National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW).<sup>10</sup> However, from a scientific point of view, these figures were wanting. Each municipality had their own way of counting and not all of them used the same categories. Although the figures have been reported widely in Sweden, the most interesting conclusion that could be drawn was in fact how indecisive they were and how little was known about this group of children, something which in itself could be constituted as an important finding.

In addition to managing the questionnaire, I travelled to different parts of Sweden to meet with children and parents that I had come in contact with through the Save the Children network and other organisations. I still recall the first interview with a mother who had just been re-housed, but who had prior to that moved around with her five children between hostels, hotels and temporary flats for over two years. The frequency in moves and inadequate living arrangements shook me. Later I would meet families who had lived on campsites for months on end with no hope of a solution in sight. The majority of these families were headed by a single migrant mother; some of the mothers had fled community-based violence in their countries of origin and others had suffered from domestic violence and abuse at the hands of an ex-partner. The focus of my report was the impact on the children, but my interest in how those experiences were shaped by Sweden's institutional and legislative framework, as well as by wider socio-economic and political structures, was awoken. Again, it was the contrast between what I saw in Sweden and what I had experienced in the UK that made me intrigued. At SPAN, we had also met homeless families, but the regulatory framework was completely different. The Homeless Act stipulated that families with children should be given priority access to shelter and social housing.<sup>11</sup> There were also large charities like Shelter that offered both support and advocacy services on behalf of homeless families. In Sweden, it was the absence of any framework and support infrastructure, within which family homelessness could be addressed, that stood out, as well as the silences surrounding the situation of homeless families. Having worked and lived in an area with high levels of deprivation in inner-city Bristol for many years, the face of abject poverty and destitution was not new to me, but what I saw in Sweden felt both violent and hidden – it appeared to be a silent exclusion. At the same time, I knew that family homelessness

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<sup>10</sup> This definition will be discussed more in detail in chapter four.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview and summary of the British homelessness legislation and duties, powers and obligations on housing authorities and others towards people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, visit the UK government website: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/homelessness-code-of-guidance-for-local-authorities/overview-of-the-homelessness-legislation> For a scholarly discussion on the history of the UK homelessness safety net, see Fitzpatrick & Pawson (2016).

was on the rise across Western Europe at an unprecedented rate, regardless of institutional and legislative frameworks. There were clearly both commonalities and differences.

Pierre Bourdieu once argued that ‘using material poverty as the sole measure of all suffering keeps us from seeing and understanding a whole side of the suffering characteristic of the social order’ (1999, p. 4). Indeed, even more than the poor housing conditions I saw, it was the suffering and pain expressed to me, and the indifference with which this appeared to be treated by Swedish institutions, that lingered in my consciousness. Many times this was shared with me through tears and feelings of powerlessness, but it was also expressed through anger and resentment. The British scholars Liz Frost and Paul Hoggett have maintained that:

...in unequal societies some are ‘done to’ more than others. Our hypothesis is that social suffering refers to the hurt and loss accompanying the abjection that is consequence of the continued existence of domination in democratic societies. Because the exercise of ‘power over’ others appears natural and legitimate, the hurt that produces shame and humiliation and the losses that lead to grief become detached from the social relations which generate them. The suffering that then results becomes individualized and internalized... (2008, p. 442).

When suffering becomes individualized and internalized, it tends to be surrounded by silences or individualized blame. However, as described by Paul Farmer ‘...underneath this silence lies the pent-up anger born of innumerable small indignities, and of great and irremediable ones’ (2003, p. 25). Iain Wilkinson (2004) has discussed the implications for social scientists of attempting to write about the political and moral significance of the very task of understanding and depicting what suffering does to people. This cannot be avoided, he argues; instead we should embrace it and see it as ‘the motive force in the advancement of ethical debate on the character of our times’ (p. 119). This is a view shared by Farmer, who points out that silences on behalf of those suffering tend to be conditioned, but that underneath the silence there is often a great eloquence buried. Sometimes, he says, it becomes the role of the researcher to ‘scratch at this surface silence, to trigger that painful eloquence’ (2003, p. 26). However, while doing so one has to tread carefully not to engage in ‘disrespectful rooting’, but rather keep one’s focus on the purpose of ‘bearing witness’ in a respectful manner.

## **A single-mother perspective**

At SPAN we often used to say that ‘what works for a single parent works for two-parent families as well’. Our key concern was the necessary circumstances that would allow single mothers to reconcile motherhood, work and other areas of life. The need for a holistic approach, which takes all these different aspects of life into consideration, was also advocated by single mothers in participatory research and support projects (Haux et al. 2012; Samzelius 2011; Giullari 2007). While being in charge of a busy community centre and front-line services I rarely had the time to reflect on the wider meaning and potential of the use of a ‘single-mother perspective’ in research and policy. Most services were developed pragmatically in response to the needs that we saw and had identified in dialogue with the parents that came to our centre, with other service providers, and in response to a changing political and funding landscape.

However, once I moved to Sweden in 2015 and started to see both differences and similarities to the reality I knew from the UK, I began to reflect more deeply around the importance of this perspective in policies, directly or indirectly, aimed at single mothers that experience poverty and housing exclusion. Although statistics in Sweden show a dramatic increase in one-parent households that are struggling financially, particularly those headed by a single migrant mother, the reality behind these figures has received little attention in social policy and is often ignored in public discussions. The majority of single mothers who at some point are in receipt of social assistance in greater Stockholm have a foreign background, and some of those mothers are suffering from the ‘double burden’ of poverty and housing exclusion. However, the weight of this experience is not accounted for in official reports on uptake of and exit from social assistance (see e.g. Stockholms stad 2019b). As argued by Torbjörn Hjort (2019) – in effect we know very little about the trajectory of those that exit.

Feminist scholars have pointed at the problems that occur when we separate ‘facts’ from subjectivity and strip away the context of their production. We cannot claim that statistics showing reduced costs for social assistance and reduced case-loads is actually representing a positive change in the lives of those who have exited, without following up on the outcome for the individual. As argued by Karen Swift:

Knowledge produced through these processes...has separated meaning from the actual experiences of women's lives in a way that hides, glosses over, or distorts the nature of that experience. Feminists thus identify 'reality disjunctures' between

what is actually experienced by women - their lived experience - and that which is presented by science as factual knowledge about this reality (1995, p. 29).

However, while engaging in such a venture, we need to recognise that also among women there are differences that shape our experiences. A central quest in this thesis is to find out what new knowledge about family homelessness and poverty can be generated by putting the experiences and voice of marginalized single mothers at the centre of our analysis. What kind of 'reality disjunctures' will we be able to identify?

The Swedish author Anne-Marie Ljungberg (2015) has tried to ask similar questions in an essay where she reflects on her own experiences of being part of a single-mother self-help group in the city of Gothenburg and the frustration often felt with the epistemic ignorance, or the apparent 'need not to know', within mainstream Swedish public feminism. Drawing on the work of the Swedish scholar Viktoria Fareld (2008), she asks the question 'What happens if you put people's dependency and vulnerability at the centre of political philosophy, rather than their independence, sociability and rationality?' (Ljungberg 2015, p. 13). Her essay is an ardent critique of a feminism that is built on the reality of middle-class women and a gender equality model based on the ideals of dual-earner/dual-carer families (see also Wennberg 2008; Gunnarsson 2013; Roman 2018). Ljungberg's critique echoes that of scholars sometimes referred to as 'critics of feminism in power' (Orloff, Ray & Savci 2016). As women enter the arenas of power in politics, law and business, the assumption that all women, regardless of difference in social location, face certain kinds of exclusion, no longer stands. What particularly needs to be problematized, Ljungberg and other critics argue, is the use of a liberal feminist discourse in advancing a neoliberal individualistic agenda that puts women with low incomes at further disadvantage.

Feminist scholars themselves are of course not exempt from bias and generalizations. Motherhood and our understanding of it occur in specific historical situations framed by interlocking structures of race/ethnicity, culture, class and gender. Some of the early feminist academic writing was criticised for failing to take into account the experiences of Black and working-class women, especially mothers, in North America as well as in Europe. The assumption of a male domination in the political economy and the household did not reflect the reality of many working-class mothers – particularly those that were raising their children single-handedly whilst also engaging in the labour market. The division between 'paid' and 'unpaid' labour posits a dichotomous split between the public sphere of economic and public discourse

and the private sphere of family and household responsibility. As a result, work and family have come to be seen as two separate institutions. In Sweden, this dichotomy is particularly salient due to a strong labour-market orientation in gender-equality frameworks (Gunnarsson 2013). Yet, for many mothers such a distinction cannot easily be made.

bell hooks once wrote that ‘During the early stages of contemporary women’s liberation movement, feminist analyses of motherhood reflected the race and class biases of participants’ (1984, p. 133). She continued by saying that:

...some white, middle class, college educated women argued that motherhood was the locus of women’s oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education...would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood (1984, p. 133).

Feminist theory on motherhood, hooks argued, was racialized and classed. Today critics of ‘feminism in power’ are arguing that we are seeing a new version of this bias in ‘neoliberal feminism’ that focuses on individual success and choice while ignoring the experiences of women that face hardship and poverty. These developments have also served to reinforce the emphasis on work as the route to independence and seen as separate from the caring responsibilities (Fraser 2016). In Sweden, the classed and racialized experience of care and work is primarily noticeable in the rapid expansion of a new domestic service sector, which has been framed as contributing to gender equality among the buyers of those services, whilst ignoring the working and living conditions of female migrant and working-class employees (Calleman 2011).

Collins (1994) has maintained that two problems arise when centring concerns on middle-class women. Firstly, the assumption that a relative degree of economic security exists for all mothers and their children, and, secondly, the assumption that all women enjoy the privilege of seeing themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy. A key concept in Collins’ theorizing about motherhood is the idea of ‘motherwork’, which she suggests as a way of ‘soften[ing] the dichotomies [...] between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity as growing from the collective self-determination of one’s group’ (ibid., p. 373). Collins claims that the mothering and work experiences of women of colour often occur at the boundaries demarking these dualities.

I would argue that many working-class women in Sweden have had similar experiences and that Collins' ideas also resonate with marginalized single mothers of different ethnic backgrounds today. Certainly, grassroots working-class, single-parent and migrant-women campaigning and support groups are often founded on these premises and continue to operate across these boundaries (see e.g. Ljungberg 2015; Cohen et al. 2017). Recognising the space that 'motherwork' occupies, but from a single-mother perspective, could help us to shift our thinking about the possibilities of reconciling motherhood with paid employment and possibly also about social work practice involving mothers who are parenting alone. This is important, as previous research has showed that the mother-child relationship tends to be at the centre of efforts by single mothers to move out of poverty (see e.g. Kielsgaard, Kristensen & Nielsen 2018; Freeman, 2017; Haux et al. 2012; Lewis 1997b).

Placing the ideas and experiences of marginalized single migrant mothers at the centre of my analysis thus invokes a different epistemology concerning what type of knowledge is represented and recognised. The arguments put forward by Collins also resonate with Skeggs' assertion that if we are not acknowledging different experiences and the circulation of local value/s beyond the dominant symbolic:

...a concept of the norm is produced which is read back onto those who do not have access to the forms of capital and knowledge of those designated as norm and are thus found wanting. The tacit and normalizing effect in knowledge operates by taking one group's experiences and assuming these to be paradigmatic of all. When only the middle class speak to the middle class the knowledge will be taken as legitimate and reproduced. It is when different audiences are introduced and respond that challenges over the legitimacy of knowledge are produced. Many theorists do not try to hear or see anything other than from where they are located (1997, p. 19).

Despite Sweden's reputation as a 'women- and child-friendly' welfare state, I would argue that the combined impact of the intersecting arenas of housing precariousness and poverty on single-mother households has received less attention in Sweden than in the UK. As pointed out by Lena Wennberg:

In Swedish policy discourse, the starting point for explaining social exclusion has today largely come to be the abuse of social security and the assumption that social rights per se cause poverty, dependence and social exclusion. Strategies in legal regulation and in policies for strengthening the incentives to work, for the

freedom of choice in the perceived dual-earner dual-carer family, reflect the kind of logic of separation that obscures the lived experience of solo mothers (2008, p. 359).

In other words, it appears that the economic and social status of middle-class women, as well as priorities with regard to models that favour dual-earner/dual-carer families, serve to displace the material gendered and racialized patterns of inequality affecting low-income single mothers by pushing their experiences into the corner of the stigmatized, and gender-neutral, arena of 'welfare dependency'. As a result, the gendered aspects of material inequality and the finer details of difficulties facing single mothers in need of assistance, are made invisible. Also among Swedish feminists, it is rare to touch upon the gendered and racialized nature of social assistance and the negative impact that the stigma of 'welfare dependency' and conditional welfare risks having on vulnerable single women and their children (Ljungberg 2015). How this is experienced and played out in practice will become clearer to the reader throughout the thesis.

In comparison with Sweden's Nordic neighbours, 'a Swedish solo mother seems to be the least noticed in social assistance regulations as well as in social insurance schemes' (Wennberg 2008, p. 121). Swedish legislation is, since the 1970s, gender-neutral and to be a lone parent does not guarantee any specific support or legislative exceptionalism. However, within the modern welfare state, as pointed out by Jaber Gubrium and Margareta Järvinen (2013), everyday life issues and difficulties that create a need for assistance have to be transformed into 'problems' that fit into established discourses and categories of solutions available within a particular institutional context. If 'problems' exist that are not recognised within an institutional context such as that of social services, those experiencing its consequences are at risk of suffering from misrecognition. For example, when social services are granted discretionary powers to sanction service users, the non-recognition of a given problem or situation might lead to harmful and unjust practices that disproportionately affect a certain group.

Categories are of course necessary for us to describe things; however, we need to acknowledge that categories 'exist within spatial and temporal contexts and are emergent rather than given and unchangeable' (Anthias 2013, p. 8). Therefore, 'it is important to be sensitive to the relationships between social categories, rather than presuppose them' (*ibid.*, p. 14). The legal categorization of a social group can serve both to include and to exclude. It can lead to recognition as well as stigmatization. It can

also shape how we understand or interpret the situation of such groups in a wider societal context. Iris Marion Young (2005) has referred to this dilemma, in relation to groups that experience different forms of oppression, as ‘paradoxical oppression’. There are groups that can be both marked by stereotypes and rendered invisible at the same time. This is the effect of a universalisation of dominant groups’ experiences and culture which tend to be seen as the norm. Dominant meanings of society can render the particular perspective or experiences of marginalized groups invisible at the same time as they are at risk of being stereotyped. The ‘single-mother perspective’ developed in this thesis serves to make the experience of single motherhood at the margins of the Swedish welfare state visible. It is thus used as an analytical tool, or a framework, which, I argue, can help us to uncover processes of exclusion and inclusion in the Swedish welfare model and the impact on those affected.

## **The politics of representation and epistemic injustice**

How we describe or portray poverty and those suffering from its consequences will frame how policy-makers and the wider public respond to the needs and circumstances, for example, of families experiencing homelessness. Is ‘the problem’ individualized, or is it understood as a structural consequence of the social, political and economic order? Is the intersection of factors such as gender, parenting, race/ethnicity, disability and class recognised? bell hooks has argued that ‘The politics of representation is a crucial element in the politics of poverty’ (1994, p. 169), since discourses influence how ‘they [people in poverty] are treated by officials, professionals, politicians and their fellow citizens’ (ibid.). She also warns us that efforts by dominant groups to represent those who are oppressed can amount to a form of colonization, reinterpreting and thereby erasing the ‘Voice’ of the speaking subject (hooks 1990). This is why knowledge about the experience of poverty needs to be developed through ongoing dialogue where we speak *with*, not just about or to. It is also why we need to recognise the very political and normative nature of any approach to questions concerned with suffering and injustice. This points to the ethical core of institutional conduct and whether people with experience of poverty are recognised in their capacity as ‘knowers’, or not (Fricker 2007).

Sometimes we are unwittingly drawn into the politics of representation as representatives of organisations or ‘experts’ on a given topic. Following the publication of Save the Children’s report mentioned earlier, I have often been invited to speak about family homelessness and poverty in Sweden. On the one hand, it has been an opportunity to break the silence. Several of the informants said they appreciated it,

as it was seen as a form of recognition. On the other hand, it is easy to be pulled into the process of ‘Othering’ when we are not in charge of how a story is told. On one occasion, I was invited to talk about family homelessness on one of Sweden’s most popular daytime TV talk shows. As is so common in the media world, they also wanted ‘a case’ – someone who has a personal experience that they can share. I asked a mother who I had interviewed for the Save the Children report, and who was now permanently housed, if she would like to participate if she could remain anonymous. However, after an initial chat over the phone with one of the producers she declined. ‘It feels too personal and it would be as if I was naked in front of all these people’ (not verbatim), she said to me. She added: ‘You know, journalists have their own agenda. You can talk about it on our behalf, but for me it is too personal and brings up bad memories’ (not verbatim). In the end, I went on my own but had shared a few quotes from the report which illustrated some of the points I wanted to make.

Prior to the show I had several conversations with two different producers. I had sent them the report and guided them to what I thought was important. At some point in the conversation I must have told them how I became interested in the topic and that I had been a struggling single mother myself when my daughter was little. I had also talked about different experiences shared by mothers and children that were not necessarily in the report. When I asked what questions I would be asked I was told it would be a number of quite general questions regarding family homelessness, which I agreed to. On the morning of the show I was picked up in a taxi and taken to the TV studio, where I had my make-up and hair done. I was then walked to the studio, where I met the presenter for the first time. We sat down in two big armchairs and she told me that she would first introduce the programme and that they would show some quotes and pictures on a big screen. Afterwards she would join me and we would talk for about ten minutes. The show was recorded live.

The presenter walked to the screen and the cameras were turned on. She introduced the topic and I saw straight away that they had depicted some of my words as a quote from a child. It was the most violent incidents that were portrayed, but without the context in which they had occurred. Furthermore, I heard the presenter say that they had spoken to ‘many women’ but that nobody wanted to participate because they felt ‘shame’ over their situation. I remember thinking, ‘They only spoke to one mother and she did not feel ashamed – she felt vulnerable’. The presenter then came over to me and the interview began. Most of the questions reflected what I had been briefed about until, suddenly, the presenter asked me, ‘You have had

some personal experience of hardship as well?'. I flinched and said, 'Yes, but not exactly like this'. She asked me again. I said, 'Yes, I did', before quickly moving on to talking about family homelessness in Sweden again. After the interview, I was congratulated by friends and colleagues and I am sure nobody had really noticed what I saw or felt. The presenter, however, had observed my reluctance and apologized. Nevertheless, I could not help reflecting on what had just happened and how it had struck me. I thought I was in control, but I clearly was not. They wanted 'a case' and in the absence of someone with personal experience of homelessness in Sweden, they tried to make it personal by talking about me. Momentarily I was turned into an object, rather than a subject. Just like the mother had said – they had their own agenda.

Why am I sharing this experience? Well, because I believe it says something about the politics of representation and how we constantly need to reflect on our own position within it. It also illustrates the issue of agenda-setting and trust. With whom do we want to share and why? To what end? When do we say yes to exposure and when do we say no? How can we change the narrative under these conditions? Who is our audience? What is the motive force that prompts us to break the silence?

Ljungberg's (2015) essay about what she refers to as 'a feminism of the precariat' (*prekärfeminism*) is a rare intervention in public feminist debates in Sweden where she does not only criticise mainstream feminism and Swedish gender equality policy, but where she also tries to formulate what might really make a difference in the lives of those single mothers that are living at the margins of the Swedish welfare state. She is asking for recognition and for epistemic justice allowing for a more diversified understanding of what it means to be a woman and a mother that is parenting alone without financial security. It is not pity that she wants, but recognition and respect. Just like myself, she wrote her book when she had had time to look back and reflect on her previous experiences. We might be in a different location today, but we cannot let go of what we know, what we have experienced and what we see as an epistemic injustice when a single mother in a less privileged position is 'wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower' (Fricker 2007, p. 18).

Fricker (2007) has argued that it is this wrongdoing that prevents some groups, for example, marginalized single migrant mothers, from contesting distorted understandings of their social experiences. However, just because somebody is not 'seen' or 'heard' in public, this should not be equated with an unwillingness to engage or be active. In more cases than not, it is the powerlessness and social arrangements that contribute to silences. In my encounters both with single mothers and with front-line workers, I was met with a desire to speak out and to talk about situations

which were both difficult and immensely painful. As expressed by Bourdieu in his essay *Understandings*, interviews and other contacts with researchers can be an important means of communication, or a way to make oneself heard, for the participant:

Certain respondents, especially the most disadvantaged, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them to testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an opportunity also to explain themselves in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both about themselves and about the world and to bring it into the open (1996, p. 615).

Power is in itself a crucial resource, which is distributed on unequal terms. How we use it is key to the story we are able, and possibly also willing, to tell.

## Representing poverty

The politics of representation is closely intertwined with how we view and portray people affected by poverty. Do we depict people solely as the victims of individual circumstances, or do we try to place their personal predicament within a wider context of social and economic inequalities? As researchers, we can only narrate the experiences of our informants and to do them justice we need to be open with our intentions regarding participation, interpretation and representation (Griffin 1996). With this in mind, Michal Krumer-Nevo and Orly Benjamin have called for researchers to ‘become more sophisticated players in the arena of the politics of representation’ (2010, pp. 15-16). Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin argue that the researcher needs to build an awareness of how also counter-narratives can contribute to processes of ‘Othering’. In doing so, they distinguish between three counter-narratives. The first and oldest narrative is termed the *structure/context counter-narrative*. The other two counter-narratives – the *agency/resistance counter-narrative* and the *voice/action counter-narrative* – are built on the analysis of the structure/context counter-narrative. They describe the three narratives as follows:

- The *structure/context narrative* challenges the subjects’ attributed inferiority by unveiling the general and specific structural/policy context within which poverty takes place and is enhanced.

- The *agency/resistance narrative* challenges the assumed moral deficit, passivity and dependence of people living in poverty by showing the many ways people negotiate their best path of action within limited opportunity structures.
- The *voice/action narrative* challenges the assumed intellectual inferiority of people in poverty by shedding light on their voices and their knowledge, an act which can serve as a basis for a valuable critical analysis of society and for social protest (pp. 694-695).

Although all three narratives aim at being critical of the neoliberal model, Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin argue that all three can be used in ways that undermine their critical value. The *structure/context* narrative, which most closely resembles the traditional Swedish social democratic model, risks dehumanizing people with experience of poverty, as it makes them ‘invisible’ in that it can disregard the actual people affected. Such a disregard can lead to portrayals where people are primarily seen as victims of their circumstances, which can be reinterpreted as a result of ‘passivity’. Furthermore, a commitment to not wanting to ‘blame the victim’ can also lead to scholars ignoring non-normative behaviour, which is seen by the public as unreliable. The *agency/resistance* model carries the risk of idealizing people in poverty, as it risks falling into the old dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as well as reinforcing the idea that welfare subjects are either ‘passive’ or ‘active’. Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin further point out that ‘the line separating an interpretation of people’s strengths as demonstrating their agency and their action of resistance, or as evidencing their own responsibility for their “bad choices”, remains thin and risky’ (p. 702).

Finally, they argue that the counter-narrative of *voice and action* entails the risk of exploiting people in poverty. First, ‘voices’ of people in poverty can be as harsh and unapologetic as those of the ruling elites, as they are sometimes unaware of contextual causes. The stigma surrounding their situation can also mean that they try to distance themselves from others in similar positions. An example of that is a single mother who sees herself as misfortunate in contrast to single mothers ‘who brought it upon themselves’, thus reinforcing a value-loaded hierarchy of single motherhood and stereotypes. Or it could be more established migrants who have little understanding for the difficulties facing more newly-arrived groups. Secondly, Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin argue that ‘offering participants’ voices without investigating the influence of social processes shaping them may enhance Othering’ (p. 705), which in its turn can justify individualized interventions. Finally, there is a risk that ‘voice’ is turned into decorative quotes at conferences or in reports that serve the re-

searcher's agenda (or media), but without giving any political power. This is, in a way, what happened when I was interviewed about family homelessness on the talk show, which I described earlier.

In the most radical form of the *voice/action narrative*, people with experience of poverty are themselves actively involved in the research through methods of co-production. A participatory approach which generates new insights into the reality of poverty has also been endorsed by international organisations such as the United Nations and the OECD (Bray et al. 2019). The French anti-poverty group ADT Fourth World is one of the pioneering organisations behind what sometimes is referred to as a 'Merging of Knowledge methodology' where practitioners, academics and people facing poverty are co-researchers. Through the application of this method, researchers have been able to identify reoccurring key dimensions of poverty across national contexts. Those core dimensions draw attention to 'the suffering resulting from disempowerment caused by privation and maltreatment, and the way people respond to it through struggle and resistance' (Bray et al. 2019). They also stress that poverty is dynamic and that people in poverty are typically proactive agents that try to deal with their situation to the best of their ability. Nevertheless, poverty is experienced as lacking control and it might mean compliance and forced dependency on others, with dehumanization and loss of dignity as a consequence. Often there is little margin for error in choices made, as the result of wrong decisions can be severe. To counter processes of 'Othering', Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin suggest that a combination of the three counter-narratives offers the greatest potential to minimize the risk. Studies that take such an approach 'always situate individual experience and voice within material and discursive contexts, on the one hand, and policies and institutional practices, on the other'. They also indicate that 'often avoiding Othering is related to researchers' deep commitment to social justice' (2010, p. 708).

## **Poverty, gender and homelessness**

Until recently, in Europe, there has been a common assumption that children and their carers are looked after by social services in the event of homelessness. However, as pointed out by Nicholas Pleace, 'there is a growing evidence that this assumption may be wrong and that both family homelessness and women's homelessness may be more widespread than was thought' (2019, p. 22). Families with children are now the fastest growing homelessness population in many European countries, including Sweden, and in North America (Bassuk, Hart & Donovan 2020; Darbeda et

al. 2018; Murphy 2019; Reeve 2017; Fitzpatrick & Pawson 2016; Slimani et al. 2019; Ackeart 2019; Quittelier & Horvat 2019). Across all countries, single mothers and their children make up the vast majority of this population (Baptista 2019; Rabi-ah-Mohammed, Oudshoorn & Forchuck 2019; Mayock & Bretherton 2016; Desmond 2016; Nordfeldt 2012). Ellen Bassuk (2015), an American public health expert and leading scholar in this field, has claimed that family homelessness consolidates all of our society's gender issues in one place. Underlying factors mentioned are: the rise in female-headed households in poverty, the expansion of the low-wage economy, lack of affordable housing, an inappropriate response to victims of domestic violence and cuts in human service programmes. Bassuk's statement echoes Fraser's assertion that 'social-welfare struggles should become more central for feminists' as single mothers and children bear the brunt of this emerging social crisis. It also resonates with the concerns raised by Swedish welfare scholars at the end of the 1990s, when they argued that the move towards a selective or residual welfare system endangered the 'classic alliance between women and the welfare state' (Sunesson et al. 1998, p. 19).

Material deprivation and a scarcity of resources are recurrent themes in research involving single mothers with experience of homelessness (Rabi-ah-Mohammed, Oudshoorn & Forschuck 2019). It is argued that the dynamic interplay between individual circumstances and institutional as well as structural levels is increasingly pushing vulnerable families into a state of destitution. The American ethnographer, and author of the bestselling book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, Matthew Desmond has argued that:

...acknowledging the breadth and depth of the problem changes the way we look at poverty. For decades, we've focused mainly on jobs, public assistance, parenting, and mass incarceration. No one can deny the importance of these issues, but something fundamental is missing. We have failed to fully appreciate how deeply housing is implicated in the creation of poverty (2016, p. 5).

Also in Desmond's study it is single mothers and their children who are described as the most vulnerable citizens. As women, they earn less money than men and they are less able to make deals with landlords, who are often men. However, it is their responsibility as mothers and the costs and burdens of child-rearing, he argues, which make them less likely to be able to find sustainable solutions to their housing problems. Their children mean that they are less mobile, at the same time as landlords

dislike renting to families with young children and who depend on any form of welfare benefits. The landlords that do rent to those families, often let out flats in poor conditions in the most run-down and poverty-stricken districts of the city.

In Sweden, the link between contemporary family homelessness and the creation of poverty remains underexplored, although its structural dimensions are recognised through the recent distinction made between ‘structural’ and ‘social’ homelessness in Sweden (Björkhagen Turesson 2019). However, rather than being offered support, the growing group of families, many of whom are women with children, classified as ‘structurally’ homeless, is increasingly defined out of the groups entitled to assistance from public authorities in Sweden (Samzelius 2018; Sahlin 2020). It is the consequences of such policies, and how they are experienced by those affected, that are a key concern in this thesis.

Bourdieu (1985) has raised questions around the power of naming and how the symbolic struggle over the production of common sense influences legal and other classifications. The single mothers in this research described themselves as ‘homeless’ when they did not have a security of tenure and were forced to depend on the goodwill of social workers, family, friends, acquaintances or strangers. This did not necessarily mean that they were officially recognised as ‘homeless’ by those entitled to classify them as such. Hence, the *official* version of family homelessness in Sweden is very likely to differ significantly from the *experienced* version of family homelessness. This will also have a bearing on how this situation is felt and described by both those that suffer its consequences and those that decide who is ‘worthy’ of assistance and who is not. As Dorothy Smith puts it:

Our ‘knowledge’ is thus ideological in the sense that this social organization preserves conceptions and means of description which represent the world as it is for those who rule it, rather than as it is for those who are ruled (1973, p. 267).

However, how those that rule see the world changes over time and will depend on the ‘political moment’ that we find ourselves in. It will also depend on what type of knowledge is seen as valuable by those with power to define and prioritize.

## **The ‘poverty paradox’ and social work**

In Sweden, during the 1990s, the responsibility for homeless people was in effect transferred to local social welfare boards, although they cannot provide, or influence

the allocation of, regular housing. Through a careful reading and analysis of key policy documents published in the 1990s and the early 2000s, the Swedish sociologist Ingrid Sahlin (2004) demonstrates how a controlling discourse, where the term homeless was increasingly associated with social problems, emerged:

...homelessness was little by little redefined as no longer a housing issue but a matter for the social services, and public housing was gradually released from its former responsibility to provide housing to those who cannot purchase their own homes (Sahlin 2004, p. 347).

The central role that social services have received, albeit reluctantly, in responding to the needs of people that are experiencing acute homelessness, is an important backdrop to understanding the concerns raised in this study as well as the division of homeless individuals and families into ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups. Social services in Sweden are primarily focusing on individual deficiencies/dysfunctions and on remedying immediate needs through the administration of a means-tested social assistance scheme. In processes that focus on individualized problems, statutory social work often divorces clients’ needs and problems from the broader and multi-dimensional context of poverty (as well as the specific forms of exploitation this might generate) and how this shapes their life circumstances (Swift 1995).

Despite a rhetoric that is oriented towards human rights and social justice, statutory social work has been criticised in Sweden and elsewhere, for placing insufficient emphasis on issues of poverty (see Swärd 2018b; Dahlstedt & Lalander 2018; Krumer-Nevo 2017; Cummins 2018; Feldman 2018). The British social work scholar Ian Cummins (2018) has referred to this as the ‘poverty paradox’ in social work – at the same time as social workers are directly involved with people experiencing poverty, there is a ‘poverty blindness’ in many of the interventions. As a result, little attention is devoted to the development and employment of working methods that signify poverty as a critical problem and explicitly consider its impact on the individual (Swift 1995). Cummins belongs to a growing group of scholars in the field of social work who are calling for human dignity to be put at the centre of social work practice. ‘Social work needs to reinvigorate a professional culture that sees the poor, the marginalised and excluded not as sites of risk, but as fellow citizens’ (2018, p. 144), he argues. For such a change to be possible, the ‘processes of Othering’ in which the profession has been embroiled need to be put to the side.

Many scholars discuss the ‘poverty paradox’ in relation to what Sarah Banks (2014) refers to as ‘new managerialism’ (also referred to as New Public Manage-

ment) and the emphasis on measurable outputs, targets and cost effectiveness in the provision of public services which has become widespread across Europe since the 1990s. Banks considers how a growing interest in ethics can offer a critique of the increasing ‘value-neutrality’ (Reamer 2006) within social work by emphasising professional agency and a commitment to social justice. There is a danger, she argues, when social workers are too concerned with ‘rule-following’ and upholding the duty to a regulatory framework uncritically and without questioning. In a similar vein, Krumer-Nevo (2017) has argued that this development risks leading to social workers disregarding the political-economic influences both on their profession and on the living conditions of their clients. She further points out that it might be manifested in treating social work practice as a ‘discrete scientific or technical expertise obscuring its ontological, epistemological and ethical foundations’. Consequently, Krumer-Nevo argues, ‘the political nature of questions regarding the “why”, “how” and “for what goal” of practice go un-examined’ (2017, p. 811).

The questions of ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘for what goal’ have also been applied within debates regarding the increasing use of conditional forms of welfare across advanced welfare states. Welfare conditionality can be understood as the linking of welfare rights, benefits or services to ‘responsible behaviour’ or particular obligations (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018). During the years that I worked at SPAN, welfare reforms and increased conditionality targeting lone parents were gradually introduced in the UK and the impact of sanctioning regimes on vulnerable adults and children’s well-being became a concern (see e.g. Haux et al. 2012; Dewar 2013). While debates in Anglo-Saxon countries had previously focused on the question of whether lone parents should be treated as mothers or as workers, it was gradually transformed into a question of when they were treated as workers (Lewis 2006).

In the UK, the previous gender regime was framed within a ‘maternalist policy model’, which supported mothers as full-time carers (Millar 2019). The lack of child-care and family-friendly employment policies meant that many single parents lived on social assistance. In Sweden at this time, single mothers were already expected to work, and the support offered was based on a ‘resource’ principle aimed at enabling women to combine labour-market participation with caring responsibilities (Wennberg 2008). When the active welfare regime was introduced in both countries in the late 1990s, the contrast with the previous gender regime was more accentuated in the UK than in Sweden. Furthermore, lone parents as a group were explicitly targeted by the

new policies. This might be one of the reasons why the impact of activation measures and sanctions has been scrutinized much closer.<sup>12</sup> Yet, as will become clear throughout this thesis, the question of welfare conditionality more broadly, and the ideological ideas underpinning its execution, can be linked with the pain and suffering experienced by marginalized single mothers and their children in both countries.

Since the late 1990s, a body of both qualitative and quantitative research, investigating the impact on lone parents and their families, has been built up in the UK, and I believe it should also be of interest in other national contexts (see e.g. Haux 2011; Ridge & Millar 2011; Haux et al. 2012; Bennett et al. 2016; Millar & Bennett 2016; Johnsen & Blenkinsopp 2018; Millar 2019). Being familiar with this literature and having worked with front-line services during the implementation of the welfare reforms in the UK, I was intrigued by the lack of attention to these issues from a 'single-mother perspective' in Sweden – both in policy and in practice. Much of this literature resonates with the findings from a recent five-year-long research programme looking into welfare conditionality more broadly, but with one strand focusing on lone parents (Dwyer 2018). Through interviews with lone parents, front-line practitioners and policy stakeholders, this research highlighted three key areas, which the authors argue put into question the ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality as it is currently affecting lone parents and their children (Johnsen & Blenkinsopp 2018). Firstly, they were ineffective in supporting parents to gain and maintain employment that was sustainable and offered sufficient income. Secondly, it was found that some current practices had 'seriously damaging consequences, including triggering destitution and/or compromising lone parents' mental health' (ibid., p. 7). In particular, the 'by proxy' impact on children was raised as a major concern. Finally, front-line practitioners were concerned that it was the most vulnerable lone parents that were disproportionately affected by sanctions.

## Concluding comments

In this chapter, I have explained why I believe it is important to place the ideas and experiences of marginalized single mothers at the centre of my analysis of the contemporary forms of family homelessness and poverty which are unfolding within the

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<sup>12</sup> Another difference between the two countries is that while in Sweden the state is expected to offer adequate support to people in poverty, in the UK independent welfare rights organisations have played a more prominent role in offering support to welfare claimants. Their grassroots work has also served to inform policy and advocacy work of organisations like the Child Poverty Action Group, Citizens Advice Bureau, Gingerbread (lone parent organisation), Shelter, etc.

Swedish welfare state. Drawing on my previous personal and professional experiences from the UK, I have explained why I use a critical approach to knowledge and research in this thesis. I also discuss the insights from feminist scholars who have explored the meaning of the connection between self and the wider political reality that shape social experiences. When marginalized women and/or single mothers are allowed to self-define and self-evaluate their own experience, the reality they describe often differs significantly from that described by those in more powerful positions. I therefore suggest that the theoretical understandings outlined in this chapter, offer a lens through which the experiences shared by single migrant mothers in Sweden can be analysed.

Contemporary mainstream Swedish feminism and gender equality policies have failed to capture what I refer to as a 'single-mother perspective'. Instead, it appears that the Swedish gender equality model, which is based on middle-class normative ideals of dual-earner/dual-carer families, has contributed to the silent exclusion of poor single mothers from the community of citizens that are able to make claims for recognition and redistribution. This model is based on the assumption that a relative degree of economic security exists for all mothers and children and that all women enjoy the privilege of seeing themselves primarily as individuals in search of personal autonomy. Consequently, it fails to recognise the challenges that present themselves for single mothers that need to resort to asking for financial and housing assistance from social services, and how the experience of the mother is closely intertwined with that of her child/ren.

By adopting a single-mother perspective we are forced to ask ourselves whether an intervention or a policy is working for marginalized single mothers and their children, or not. It was the great disparity between the rate of poverty among children of migrant single mothers and children in two-parent families where both parents were born in Sweden, that first caught my attention. However, as I also explained in this chapter, it was the suffering and pain expressed by the mothers and children that I met while working on a report about homelessness and housing exclusion in Sweden, that finally became my motivation for pursuing this research. How could we better understand the underlying causes of this suffering and what fundamental ethical questions did it give rise to? What did it say about the institutional arrangements and the values that shape social policies in contemporary Sweden? What were the similarities and what were the differences in comparison with the reality I was familiar with from the UK?

Finally, in this chapter I have explained how a critical paradigm can help to contest and illuminate what Cummins (2018) refers to as ‘the poverty paradox’ in social work and how this results in working practices that are ‘poverty blind’. In Sweden the means-tested social assistance scheme still operates from a ‘poor-relief’ logic where social workers are assigned to judge who is ‘deserving’ and who is ‘undeserving’ of support. Within a changing managerial context, where emphasis is put on figures and exit rather than the outcomes and well-being for families in poverty, there is an immediate risk for a misrecognition of the complex needs of single-mother families that suffer from a ‘double burden’ of homelessness and poverty. In a political moment which is emphasising ‘individual responsibility’ and conditional welfare, whilst making the pretence of ‘value-neutrality’, the ‘poverty paradox’ in social work becomes further accentuated and problematic. This, I argue, in line with other critical scholars, should prompt us to look more closely at the methods and working practices favoured, whilst asking ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘to what goal’ they are being reinforced. One way of beginning to approach those questions from a more practical point of view is to talk with those that are at the receiving end of such practices.

## **PARTICIPANTS AND POSITIONALITY: METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

In this chapter, I will introduce the women whose experiences and perspectives are at the centre of this thesis. Seventeen of the informants were single mothers who were struggling with both precarious housing situations and precarious incomes over long periods of time, often several years. Nine were women who work in front-line professions and are representative of organisations that homeless families turn to when they are in need of support in difficult situations. The overall analysis is centred on the mothers' experiences, while the interviews with the professionals are used to contextualize these accounts. The latter also support my discussion regarding some of the methodological and ethical challenges when conducting research involving marginalized and vulnerable communities within a given political moment, where principles of solidarity have largely been replaced with principles of individual responsibility. The current emphasis on individualism, choice and autonomy has had an impact on social policy as well as on clients of social services, something which in its turn also presents a specific set of trials for research that is inspired by feminist ethnographic methodology and epistemology. Furthermore, it has led to new challenges for professionals who are seen as having 'power on behalf of', rather than 'power over', clients of statutory social services, a phenomenon which I believe is important to bring into the open. Finally, I will describe how the empirical material has been gathered and analysed.

## Introductions

As I explained in chapter two, the beginning of this research project coincided with the launch of the publication on family homelessness, centred on the situation of children, that I wrote on behalf of Save the Children Sweden (Samzelius 2017). This report served as a pilot study, as it provided me with a deeper understanding of the topic at hand as well as with valuable contacts that I could draw on. About one week prior to the launch of the report, I was invited to a meeting that a group of parents were having with a journalist. As an introduction to the situation of some of the single mothers that later became informants, I would like to begin by sharing what I wrote shortly afterwards in my notes:

One evening, I was invited to meet with a group of parents whose families were precariously housed and at risk of becoming homeless. They all lived in the same municipality and were trying to mobilize around their families' right to housing through manifestations and contacts with the media. A journalist from the local newspaper was going to write about their predicament. We were meeting in a flat that one of the families had occupied for the past two years. It was a short-term let with the public housing company which had been renewed every six months, but in November the family was given a final notice and were told they would have to leave. 'Every day when I come home from work, I look for housing', the mother that lived there said, 'but nobody responds when I say that I have four children!' Two families that lived in the same block had similar stories. They had short-term contracts with the public housing company and although they were working they were unable to find somewhere else to live. Another two mothers had recently been informed by social services that they would no longer pay for their hostel accommodation and another two had been given notice that their social contracts through the municipality would be terminated. Some of these families had previously stayed in hostels and said they did not want to put their children through that experience again.

Although the reasons for being at risk of homelessness varied, these families all shared the same distress, fear and anger that nobody seemed to take their situation seriously or offer some form of useful support. They were simply told that they had to sort out their own accommodation, but although they felt they did everything that was in their power, they failed. They had attended a 'house-searching school' organised by the municipality, but to no avail. They had also been given lists of hostels and hotels in greater Stockholm that they could contact in case they had nowhere else to turn. Feelings of frustration were boiling in the room. What

was the housing company going to use the flats for? Why could nobody explain the reason why they had to leave? Where were they expected to go? How would it impact on their children? Did children not have rights in Sweden? The families had many questions, but did not feel that they received any satisfactory answers.

When the meeting with the journalist was over, one of the mothers said to me, 'Do you have time? I would like you to meet somebody who is at my house. It's only a few hundred meters from here'. I agreed and walked with her. As we arrived at the flat, we were greeted by her two children. The flat was dark and I was showed into a room where I saw a mother and two small children that were lying on a mattress on the floor. The mother stood up and greeted me. She looked tired and found it difficult to talk to me in Swedish. The woman who brought me there explained that she had met this mother and her children at the council house a few days earlier. She had been crying, as she had nowhere to go and social services had refused to help her. They did not know each other, but came from the same country. The woman who lived in the flat (for another two weeks) said she couldn't just leave her like that so she brought her with her home. I was showed a letter from social services. The mother, it said, had her own income through maternity pay and was therefore not eligible for assistance. It further stated that it was her individual responsibility to look for housing and that she had to seek support 'from her social network'. I remember thinking at the time that if she was really able to solve the situation by herself or had a social network that could help her, would she have ended up sleeping on a stranger's floor with her children?

The various temporary housing arrangements described by the families I encountered during this meeting are reflective of some of the housing 'options' available to people that are excluded from the regular housing market in greater Stockholm. Rather than being exceptions, they are the norm for families like the ones whose experiences and perspectives are shared in this thesis. How the various 'housing problems' described by the individuals affected have developed, needs to be understood in a broader historical, political and social context. This will be a reoccurring point in this thesis and the details will gradually be developed throughout the coming chapters. Through my own reflections and observations together with the experiences and views shared by the research participants, I will argue that the 'single-mother perspective' that I outlined in the previous chapter can help us to shed new light on some of the pressing policy issues in the intersecting fields of housing, social security and child welfare. For now, the questions posed in the extract above will be left

hanging. First, I would like to introduce the protagonists of this research, discuss how the endeavour evolved and present some of the challenges that I encountered on the way.

## The mothers

The analysis presented in this thesis is centred around data drawn from interviews, conversations and documents shared by seventeen single migrant mothers, aged between 25 and 48 years, with experiences of being homeless with children in Sweden. All of these women arrived in Sweden prior to the large influx of refugees and migrants that took place in the autumn of 2015.<sup>13</sup> Fifteen of the informants came to Sweden as adults and had arrived between 2003 and 2013. Two came as children in the late 1990s, but had led transnational lives and lived abroad for periods of time as adults prior to returning to Sweden. The women had arrived in Sweden as asylum seekers, or as United Nations quota refugees, through family reunification (marriage to somebody already residing in Sweden) or to look for work. All but one had either Swedish citizenship or indefinite leave to remain. However, four of the women had had their initial asylum claims rejected and lived in Sweden as undocumented during periods varying between one and six years. One woman was a third-country national with permanent residency in another European Union member state. Her position was somewhat different, as her residency in Sweden was dependent on her status as a worker in the domestic service sector. Apart from this, the circumstances facing her family were similar to those of the other mothers.

In table 1, I present the participants' assumed names, which are reflective of their ethnic/cultural origins. Most of the mothers had one or two children living with them when involved with the research. The majority of these children were born in Sweden or another EU country. Three mothers also had adult children who lived independently and one had two children who were left behind in her country of origin and whom she was trying to get permission to bring to Sweden. In the table, I also list the areas of the world where the mothers were born and the approximate length of time that they had spent in insecure housing situations with children. As I explained in the introductory chapter, in this thesis I focus on the *experience* of home-

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<sup>13</sup> During the autumn of 2015, approximately 163,000 individuals asked for asylum in Sweden (SCB 2020). The majority arrived during the months of September, October and November. This period is often described as a 'turning point' for Swedish immigration policy and the values underpinning it. In November 2015, the Swedish government introduced stricter border controls, limitations to the possibility for family reunification and an increase in temporary rather than permanent leave to remain. For a broader discussion on European responses to the rising number of refugees that entered Europe in 2015, see, for example, Gozdziaik, Main & Suter (2020).

lessness and housing exclusion rather than periods when families were recognised *officially* as homeless. During the years listed in the table, the mothers and their children journeyed between different forms of ‘hidden’ and ‘official’ homelessness, which included spells in hostels, hotels, with friends or family, as lodgers, in privately sublet flats, in flats sublet through social services or in residential care settings. Some of those arrangements offered more stability than others, but they were continuously excluded from the access to secure housing through the regular market. Those arrangements will be further discussed at length in chapters six and eight.

Table 1: Participant mothers’ assumed names, place of birth, number and age of children living with the mother, and approximate length of time in insecure housing with children.

Assumed name	Place of birth	Children living with the mother	Time in insecure housing situations with children
Alice	Central Africa	1 aged 6-12	5 years
Amal	Middle East	1 aged 0-5, 2 aged 6-12	9 years
Asma	East Africa	2 aged 0-5	4 years
Ayomi	South Asia	2 aged 6-12	2 years
Darya	Central Asia	2 aged 6-12	5 years
Gloria	Central Africa	2 aged 0-5	2 years
Hanna	East Africa	2 aged 0-5	4 years
Helen	East Africa	2 aged 13+	5 years
Judith	East Africa	1 aged 0-5	4 years
Lama	South Asia	2 aged 13+	2 years
Leila	East Africa	2 aged 0-5, 1 aged 6-12	2 years
Mounia	North Africa	2 aged 6-12	4 years
Nora	North Africa	2 aged 0-5, 3 aged 6-12 & 1 aged 13+	7 years
Sama	Central Asia	1 aged 0-5	4 years
Sara	East Africa	1 aged 6-12	4 years
Sophia	East Africa	1 aged 0-5, 1 aged 6-12	9 years
Yasmin	East Africa	2 aged 0-5, 1 aged 6-12	8 years

The over-representation of women and children with an African heritage among the informants was reflective of the data on families officially categorized as homeless in the city of Stockholm in 2017, where 44 per cent of the families had this background (Stockholms stad 2017). This should be compared to the fact that the overall

proportion of residents in the city of Stockholm who were born in an African country only amounts to approximately 3.6 per cent of the total population. In the region of Stockholm the figure is 3 per cent in total (Statistiska centralbyrån 2020).

At the time of involvement with this research project, between 2017 and 2019, the mothers were officially residents of five different municipalities in metropolitan Stockholm and four administrative districts within the city of Stockholm.<sup>14</sup> All of the municipalities were connected to central Stockholm through public transport (underground, bus or commuter trains). Some of the mothers changed their official municipality or district of residence during the course of the research, which meant that they were transferred to a new social service locality. However, the families rarely lived at the address where they were registered and during some periods the lack of an official address became a major problem. Two of the women told me they had been asked by relatives to pay money to be allowed to be registered at their address. Other expressed concerns about important letters being lost. None of the families had had a secure tenancy since arriving in Sweden or in some cases since they had separated from their children's father. Their lives as single mothers were shaped by the continuous worry about housing. All of the families had moved across large spatial distances within the region of Stockholm, generally at the outskirts of the city, and between areas with high levels of deprivation, or industrial estates where some of the emergency shelters in the city are located. One informant had spent one year living in a holiday cabin on an island outside of Stockholm where she and her children were placed by social services.

During the time that this research was carried out, a majority of the participants had ongoing or intermittent contact with social services due to their housing troubles. Eight of them were in receipt of social assistance for subsistence, while the remaining nine either worked or were in receipt of maternity benefits. One woman had qualified for unemployment insurance. Some had also been in receipt of student loans. Their sources of income, and their transitions between different forms of income and education/training, will be discussed more in detail in chapter five.

Seven of the mothers had no, or limited, contact with their children's fathers, as they resided abroad. One woman was a widow, and one mother told me she and the children had been abandoned and she did not know the whereabouts of her husband. In the remaining eight families, the father of all or some of the children, lived in the

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<sup>14</sup> The region of Stockholm has 26 municipalities and the City of Stockholm is divided into 14 administrative districts. Each one of those municipalities and districts has their own social services that operate from the same principles guided by the Social Service Act, but that can be organised and run differently.

region of Stockholm and saw their children, sometimes on a regular basis and sometimes more sporadically. In all cases, the mother had the main caring role and the children stayed with her most, or all, of the time. In several cases, the father was also living in insecure housing arrangements, often in flats shared with other men. Two fathers lived with a wife and other children. Three fathers were described as actively looking after their children and helping out with practical issues on a regular basis. One woman returned to live with her ex-husband during the course of the research. She found life in a hostel unbearable and thought life with her husband was better for her and the children.

Several mothers revealed very personal and painful experiences to me that they described as having had a major impact on their lives. In effect, the majority disclosed that they had been subject to either inter-personal or community-based violence at some point in their lives. Two women described how the abuse that they and their children had suffered at the hands of their ex-husbands was so extreme that they feared for their lives and this is what had triggered their journeys to Sweden. Four women had been placed in safe houses for survivors of domestic abuse prior to becoming homeless. Five women disclosed that they had been forced by family to marry, two of them as teenagers. Two women told me they had been subject to sexual torture/rape in their countries of origin and several women had direct experience of armed conflict and forced displacement. Some had witnessed close members of their families being killed. At least three of the women had, to my knowledge, travelled by boat across the Mediterranean Sea after transiting either through Libya or Turkey. One mother had done this journey alone with her children, who at the time were aged two and four. She described them as traumatised by this experience.

Fear of male-perpetrated violence and abuse was commonly expressed by the women in this research, also when they spoke about their current situation. In their narratives, past experiences were entwined with current circumstances, both in terms of their social position and in terms of their experiences of interactions with actors who possessed more power. Although Gender-Based Violence (GBV), notably Violence Against Women (VAW), is a prioritized issue in social policy in Sweden, it has been argued that the way it becomes entwined with poverty and homelessness is not sufficiently recognised in social service practice (see Ekström 2018; Ulmestig & Eriksson 2016). Violence Against Women (VAW) is defined by the United Nations as any act ‘that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’ (United Nations 1993). The lack of sup-

port in accessing permanent re-housing is an issue that has been identified by social workers as one of the key barriers in their work with survivors of VAW (Ekström 2016). Another issue not sufficiently accounted for is how historical experiences of violence can continue to influence the agency of an individual in a new environment. Many women who have arrived in Sweden from situations characterised by war and conflict have often been exposed, and sometimes subject, to different forms of community-based as well as inter-personal violence (see e.g. Byrskog et al. 2014; Gottval et al. 2019). This was also the case among the informants in this study.

The participant mothers were recruited through networks developed during my time of working with Save the Children in Sweden. The meeting described earlier in this chapter is an example of an occasion where I first met mothers whom I later approached and asked if they would be interested in participating in this research. Other contacts established included both individual professionals and organisations that meet homeless families in their everyday work. In some cases, another professional acted as a gatekeeper and asked if the mother would be interested in participating. In other cases, the connection was made through snowballing, where women who had already agreed to take part asked other women they knew. Building trust to ensure engagement and participation was key to the data gathering.

When I conducted a recorded interview for the first time, I always started by asking the interviewee to tell me a little bit about themselves and their families. This prompted very different answers – some women began by telling me about their life journeys and what brought them to Sweden, whilst others gave more brief but contained answers often related to their living situation, as they had been informed that this was the focus of the study. To illustrate how some mothers described themselves and their situation in their own words, I would like share the responses given by Asma, Nora and Leila.

I have lived in Sweden for five years...almost six now. I have two children. I'm a single mother. I have lived in many different places and now I live in a hotel, but it is really difficult when you have small children as a mother to be homeless and jobless also...to be unemployed, it is difficult. When I had family problems I started Swedish classes. In the afternoons I was doing work experience through the jobcentre. The money I received was very little, only 4,000 SEK per month, and then the Insurance Agency also gave me child benefit, you know. I tried to contact social services but they said unfortunately they could not help me. They told me, 'You can sort yourself out. We have no housing. You can fend for yourself. You are a young woman'. I was 25 years old when it happened (Asma).

I'm a mum. I have six children. I came to Sweden in 1999, left and came back in 2011. I have a permanent residency since 2014, but I have no flat. I went to social services. I have cried and everything. Every time I start school or a job there is a problem with housing and then everything disappears. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like every time I pick myself up I fall down again. I have to start at zero again. I always try to move forward, but they will not help me. I try to find the path but nothing is working (Nora).

I'm a mum of three children aged five, four and one. Two girls and one boy. The baby is a boy. Well, you know, I have moved around a lot. It's been a lot, you know. Also as a child, I moved a lot around Sweden. I came here with my family when I was five years old. I always used to say that when I get married I will be the kind of mum that lives in one place and creates a homely environment, that my children only go to one school and that they are safe and secure, you know. It's a bit funny how sometimes things turn out in the way you didn't want them to – the things you run away from... I'm not sure how to explain, but, you know, at least they have never had to change schools or pre-school and I have been a consistent person in their lives. So they have felt safe and that. But now this will change as one of them starts school and I just hope we will not have to move again. Right now we have a sublet contract here in [name of area]. Right now it's good, but before I had a lot of difficulties with housing and that (Leila).

## Professionals

When linked to methodological issues, feminist and poverty knowledge production should 'unravel issues of power and include interrelations that help to move towards social justice' (Davis 2013, p. 24). After and during the publication of the Save the Children report that I described in the previous chapter, I was contacted by front-line professionals who expressed a genuine and deep concern about the living situation of families with children that they met in their day-to-day work. They were teachers, school psychologists, childcare workers and paediatric nurses. Some were also social workers who were finding some of the tasks their work required them to carry out unbearable. What they had in common was a strong desire to 'bear witness' (see Farmer 2003, for a discussion about the use of this phrase in the context of suffering) and to break the silence around the living conditions of some of the most vulnerable families within the Swedish welfare state.

The American feminist ethnographer Dana-Ain Davis has pointed out that ‘new configurations of epistemology reside in particular moments’ (2013, p. 35). As social services are less likely to support families in housing crisis in Sweden, but with no other institution being assigned responsibility, the mothers in this research (and others) turn to other front-line workers for help and support. I felt that this was important to capture for two main reasons. Firstly, this was professionals entrusted with the feelings of powerlessness and suffering expressed by those affected as well as the descriptions and details of their living conditions. As such, I believe their perspectives can serve to contextualize and further support an understanding of experiences shared by the single mothers. Secondly, their professional roles do not require them to make decisions regarding ‘deservingness’ or ‘un-deservingness’, which is more likely to enable them to express compassion and solidarity with victims of injustice (see Farmer 2003). However, they also expressed feeling of powerlessness regarding the situation they faced. The frustration felt by many of these workers is captured in the following quote by Camilla, a paediatric nurse who had worked in several of Stockholm’s distressed neighbourhoods over a number of years:

It’s incredibly frustrating to see parents who are so distraught and poorly and there is nothing we can do. Social services can’t do anything. They just say, ‘We are not responsible for housing’. Although I see that this child is not getting help. The child has a parent who is depressed because they are homeless and they are unable to care for their child. I’m worried for the child. I send a safeguarding note to social services and they just say, ‘Oh, it’s housing’ and do nothing. It is incredibly hard to deal with. We meet these parents all the time. You know, if we have two cases at the same time it is all we talk about.

What Camilla is pointing to here is a systemic failure that social services are at the centre of, but that is a consequence of wider socio-economic and political processes. Those failures do not only have repercussions for the families afflicted but also for staff working in front-line caring jobs, the majority of whom are women.

The professionals that were interviewed in this research belonged to the following employment categories: health-care professionals, adult education teachers, and community advocacy workers who were either professionally trained social workers or solicitors. Their assumed names and job roles are outlined in table 2. Through their work, they met homeless families from different parts of the Stockholm region. It was nine women who had extensive work experience within their respective fields and had met homeless families for several years, but commented that it was a prob-

lem that they saw as having increased in more recent times. They also expressed a concern that the working practices of social services seemed to have changed and that decisions were harsher also when they had a negative impact on children.

Table 2: Participant professionals' assumed name and job roles

Assumed name	Job role
Angelica	Health-care professional
Camilla	Health-care professional
Emma	Adult education teacher
Frida	Advocacy worker/charity-based social worker
Julia	Legal advocacy worker
Kerstin	Adult education teacher
Maria	Advocacy worker/charity-based social worker
Naima	Health-care professional
Linda	Advocacy worker/charity-based social worker

The professionals interviewed were identified on the basis of their working roles within front-line organisations where they met mothers, and sometimes also children, facing homelessness and other forms of inadequate housing situations on a regular basis. These organisations were recognised through my conversations with mothers and also through the work I had previously done on behalf of Save the Children. Here I approached individual staff members and asked if they would like to participate in the study. In each interview, I asked them to describe their work role and, rather than summarise their answers, I share some of them here to give the reader an idea of their backgrounds and roles.

Right now I work as an assistant manager for our department that deals with advice and support. Before, I worked directly with clients with individual case work. For about one year, I have mainly been responsible for managerial tasks. It involves staff management and development of services. I'm responsible for the social work that we do around advice regarding social and economic rights, which is also about issues linked to integration for immigrants. [...] Previously we worked quite broadly, but now there are so many pressing needs so we can't continue to work like that. So we have decided to prioritize families with children that are, or are at risk of becoming, homeless. Those are the ones we see mostly now. Then it

is 80 per cent single mothers with children. All are from distressed areas and most of them are relatively new in Sweden. From newly arrived to maybe five or seven years in Sweden (Maria).

I work with study path 1 in Swedish for immigrants (SFI) and this is with students who have a short or no previous educational background. There I meet many single mothers actually...families as well, but notably many single mothers who are facing housing problems in one way or another (Kerstin).

I'm a district nurse. My role here is to support children and their parents regarding children's health. It can be anything, ranging from nutrition, exercise...it can be about children not growing as expected...We can initiate different examinations and we can make referrals to specialists if parents are worried about their children's language development, eating and so on. I have worked in this role for six months, but within this clinic for six years [...] Many families actively choose to come to our clinic although they are moving around. This becomes a central point for them so we meet these families all the time. Even when they are far away they like coming here. I think it has to do with how they are received. They feel safe here (Naima).

I work as a legal advisor in this organisation. I work within the area of social rights, but the key focus is housing. Families with children that are homeless. It is mainly this group that I see. I have only worked here for eight months, but throughout my career I have worked with issues related to the rights of children (Julia).

I work as a child nurse in this clinic. I have worked here since 2013, so for about five years. For almost the whole time I have worked with our home visiting programme. We do a lot of home visits here and this programme means that we move the appointments from the clinic to the home. For the first 15 months of a child's life, we visit six times within intervals of 1-4 months. It is on a voluntary basis, but most families say yes. We also have a parenting practitioner who is a social worker with us. They focus more on relations, while we are more concerned with health-related issues. If they say no, we do the same kind of meeting in our clinic. These families are usually those that live in overcrowded households, that move around a lot or that are lodgers. Most times they tell us about these circumstances (Angelica).

The teachers and health-care workers that I interviewed felt powerless in their attempts to raise concerns with their employers, while this was less of a concern to the advocacy workers. Kerstin and Emma tried to talk to their senior manager about the impact the situation of their students had on their work environment, but did not feel that their concerns were taken seriously. Emma explained that ‘the answer from our senior manager was that we should stop caring. That is where the problem was...’ Kerstin added, ‘It’s put on us as individuals. We were offered support to set boundaries...and, well, it is completely put on us as individuals’. They both agreed that this response was poor because there was no recognition that this was a structural problem that had an impact on them. They had to meet students every day who were suffering the consequences of acute homelessness and precarious housing arrangements. ‘I think there would be something seriously wrong with us, if we had to have counselling and not react to what we are seeing’, Kerstin said.

### **Feminist ethnographic research in a time of ‘individual responsabilisation’**

This thesis is inspired by the research tradition of feminist ethnography, which has been described as a ‘project committed to documenting lived experiences as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality and other aspects of participant’s lives’ (Craven & Davis 2013, p. 2). It also involves a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to participants. What does this mean in practice? The emphasis on mothers’ ‘individual responsibility’ to find housing, and on the individualization of a structural problem that affects the workers in professions outside of social services, can be seen as a practical outcome of the increasingly persistent process and discourse of individualization which has spread across advanced welfare states since the 1980s (see e.g. Giddens 1991; Dwyer 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Previous research in Sweden has showed that since the late 1990s, single mothers feel, to a greater extent, that they have to be ‘active’ in safeguarding their rights vis-à-vis welfare agencies such as social services and the National Insurance Agency (Gardberg Morner 2003; Yazdanpanah 2008). These processes and discourses also have a bearing on research that aims to engage with individuals who bear the brunt of social policies where they are expected to free themselves from need and dependency through ‘a form of self-actualization that revolves around personal responsibility, choice and autonomy’ (Mik-Meyer & Villardsen 2012, p. 4).

In an essay addressing issues related to the implications of research experience and data collection in an era of welfare reforms in the US, Davis (2013) relates how women in a shelter where she was conducting research saw her as a potential advocate and source of access to resources for them on an individual basis. In her writing, she explores what research participants want from a researcher and how those wants are generated at the intersection between feminist methodological strategy and neoliberalist social policy. Throughout history, poor and low-income people have been accused in various degrees of moral weakness as an explanation for their poverty (Lister 2015; Krumer-Nevo 2017; Swärd 2018b). In its current version, which tends to depict any public assistance as opposite to self-help and independence, the market is largely expected to do the work of ending poverty and creating equity and prosperity for all. If people just work hard enough and make enough effort, they will be able to take part in the wealth of society even in the absence of a system that guarantees the redistribution of resources. People who fail to ‘take responsibility’ for their own situation thus become constituted as ‘failures’. This creates a situation, argues Davis, where people in poverty need to navigate and negotiate an increased number of risks associated with insecure housing and income.

In Davis’ research, some of the women asked her to advocate on their behalf regarding their needs for housing re-settlement. Although it is fully possible to establish mutually appreciative and reciprocal relationships in the type of research conducted by Davis and myself, as a researcher you still represent somebody with access to resources and links that stretch far beyond those of the persons you engage with. However, as stated by Davis, power relations between researcher and informants in a feminist ethnographic project are ‘not necessarily about the *power over* someone, [but] about power to be used *on behalf* of someone’ (2013, p. 35). Davis further points out that ‘the responsibility of knowing these intimacies and the duty that comes with the knowing complicate both the unrealistic goal of objectivity and the goal of feminist activist ethnography, which is often broader in scope than research participants are aware of’ (2013, p. 36). Our goal as researchers is not necessarily to help at an individual level, but our engagement in ‘the field’ sometimes requires us to perform such tasks because of the intimacy created between us and the informants.

Having worked closely with single mothers subject to welfare conditionality in the UK, I was prepared for many of the issues that arose throughout the research process, which I also accounted for in my submission for ethical review and approv-

al.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I had ensured in advance that the women I engaged with could access advocacy support and representation through an independent organisation, if necessary. On more than one occasion, deeply troubling practices and procedures, from a social justice and human rights perspective, were exposed to me. Mothers and children were made destitute through social service decisions and sanctions, while subsequently being blamed for their own failure to secure housing for their children. Despite my background, I was not prepared for the callousness of some of these procedures and the disregard for the safeguarding of children and vulnerable women. It was not like anything I had seen during my ten years of working in front-line services in the UK and it left me feeling troubled. The intervention of advocacy workers did not help in many of these cases, even if having the support of somebody who listened and advocated on their behalf was described as a positive experience by the informants. Although nobody ended up sleeping in a public space during my research, their self-arranged temporary places for shelter were problematic and often unsuitable for both children and mothers.

The ethical dilemmas and difficult situations I encountered during my research, were also a reoccurring theme raised by the professionals that I interviewed and this has been expressed by social workers in the media too.<sup>16</sup> Health-care professionals like Camilla and myself as a researcher, were not in positions where we could offer adequate help to these mothers, but neither were we in positions where we had to assess whether someone was ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of support. This brings us back to Davis’ (2013) points about the role of particular political moments and the difference between having ‘power over’ someone and having ‘power on behalf of someone’. Social workers were generally seen as having ‘power over’, while I as a researcher and the professionals that were interviewed in this research were perceived as having ‘power on behalf of’. Naima, a health-care worker in a clinic on

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<sup>15</sup> The project follows the ethical guidelines for social science in Sweden and was approved by the regional Ethics Review Board in Lund on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 2018 (reg. no. 2017/865). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were told, in writing and verbally, about the research project, how data was going to be used and how I would ensure confidentiality and privacy. Participants were also informed that they would be able to withdraw their consent at any time without having to give an explanation.

<sup>16</sup> In 2019, when the city of Gothenburg changed their guidelines for statutory social work with families classified as ‘structurally homeless’, a group of social workers mobilized to highlight how they saw that the new practice could potentially be harmful to already vulnerable children and parents. Their views on this topic and links to newspaper articles can be found at: <https://socialaktion.wordpress.com/2019/07/06/hemlosheten-och-socialtjanstens-ansvar/>

one of Stockholm's peripheral housing estates, gave an example which can serve to illustrate this point:

One day there was a single mother with an eight-month-old baby who came in to my colleague screaming and crying because she had nowhere to stay. She didn't even know where she was going to sleep that night. She was hysterical. She had not eaten for days and was just not herself, you know. Before coming to us she had, like, met someone in the centre that had given her a room for the night but who could not look after her. My colleague called social services to tell them, 'This mum needs help, I cannot let her leave us because I don't know what will happen to this child'. They tell her to call the department that deals with social assistance, which she then does, but they are not even able to come and meet this mum. My colleague had to put her in a taxi, but when she arrived they wouldn't even see her. It turned out that they had had a meeting with her previously but without asking her if she needed an interpreter. So she had been sitting in a meeting where she didn't understand what they were saying. So then when my colleague calls and asks them, 'But what are you thinking! She needs an interpreter', then they say, 'Oh, but she did not tell us that'. If she had had an interpreter she would have known that she had to fill out an application form and because she hasn't done that this is why they refuse to see her. The expectation was thus that the mother should have told them that 'Please when you book a meeting I need an interpreter'. I don't understand why they are not making sure that people understand with the help of an interpreter. I really don't get it. It is a waste of time and a waste of resources... We had to contact different places on her behalf. We were dealing with this for half a day. My colleague had to keep this mum and rebook other appointments. We called psychiatric services to see if they could do something, but they said that from what we were saying she did not have a psychosis...

Finally, we got in touch with the domestic violence team at social services, because we understood that she had fled from an ex-partner. They were then able to intervene and that opened up some doors. But we had to go through all of this for her to get help. Can you imagine? We don't even know what she would have done if she hadn't come here, what would her alternatives have been? When you are desperate, you can't really think properly. You can't focus and think about what to do. It is good that my colleague took care of it, but this is not our job. But what else could my colleague have done? I would have done exactly the same as her. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I went, 'Oh, well now I'm seeing the next family, good luck' [...] We have tried to talk to social services about it. In

this case they agreed that they could have dealt with it differently, but all cases are individual. You know, we also have different priorities. If this was the worst case for us, maybe it wasn't for them, which is understandable. If this was our top priority, maybe for them it was number twenty, you know...

As qualitative researchers, or as practitioners that meet vulnerable families, we are constantly having to engage in the process of 'doing ethics' (Banks 2016). Banks (2016) has referred to this as 'ethics work', where 'work' refers to the psychological and bodily processes that professionals, like Naima and her colleague, engage with in situations like the one described above. It refers to the processes of noticing, attending, thinking, interacting and performing, which we have to engage with when an ethical dilemma presents itself and we have to make decisions about how to respond and act. In doing so, we need to recognise the complexity, contradictions and ambiguity within which we are carrying out our work, ethics in this context being 'not about simply following rules – it is about questioning and challenging, feeling and acting' (Banks 2011, p. 19). However, as recognised by Naima, our position and role might also influence what we are able, or expected, to do within the confines of our profession. Furthermore, ethical dilemmas and decisions, as argued by Davis (2013), need to be understood in relation to the political moment we are in. Individuals that work outside of social services, become brokers and advocates for access to social services in a political time of 'individual responsabilisation', whether this is their actual professional role or not. Social workers, in contrast, are often bound to follow protocols and procedures laid out by managers in a political-institutional climate where budgetary concerns are prioritized, where responsibility for emergency accommodation is questioned, and where 'welfare dependency' and 'immigrants' are stigmatized.

These different power relations and structures also had an impact on my position as a researcher who was listening to, and recording, the perspective of the mothers and therefore perceived as 'being on their side'. The stance that I adopted in relation to the informants in this study could be described as a 'situated ethics of social justice' (Banks 2011). I see ethical dilemmas and decisions in a relational sense, beyond the individual, and as informed by a broader social, political and cultural context. This has informed my overall research approach as well as my relation to the informants. It also means that I recognise the power that I have 'on behalf of', the 'relational responsibility' that comes with having 'power with' rather than 'over'

someone, and the necessity to engage in ongoing reflection on what this might mean in given situations.

For me, it was also important to ensure that the informants understood my role and what I could and could not do for and with them as individuals. The direct link that I had established with advocacy groups helped me in this endeavour, as I could refer women in need of more support. At the same time, there were tasks that I could easily help with and that I felt were ethically just to do, for example, helping to read letters and explain them in simpler words, or translate them into another language. I also helped with accessing information regarding where mothers could get help with debt advice, emergency financial support or food banks. On one occasion, I assisted a mother to formulate a letter that she could use when she applied for housing. The responsibility that comes with knowing the intimacy of someone's life, when they find themselves in vulnerable situations, also meant that I sometimes helped with more practical tasks, for example, travelling with a mother and her children between temporary housing arrangements in the middle of the winter. On most occasions, the women were expected to move with their belongings and sometimes very young children on public transport without support from social services. Sometimes they were able to ask friends for help, but this was far from always the case. These situations were reoccurring, and if I could help, I did. At the same time as I believe it was ethically right to do so, it also gave me a deeper understanding for many of the trials and tribulations that homeless mothers and children in greater Stockholm are put through. Being there with them in these situations also meant that I was able to observe where privately run hostels and hotels used by social services are located and what they look like from the inside.

## **Power and positionality**

I have so far in this chapter discussed the different implications of being in a position where you have 'power on behalf of' or 'power over' someone. This is of course crucial when considering the positionality of a researcher vis-à-vis informants. In effect, I propose the view that positionalities are inextricably intertwined with the surrounding power relations (see Breen 2007; Ryan 2015). In research involving participants with a migrant background, the researcher's assumed ethnicity is often the main social category discussed. Nevertheless, social categories gain their meaning in relation to their informants, but also in relation to the setting in which the research takes place. Hence, an outsider/insider dichotomy based on ethnicity, gender and class, and which focuses on the advantages or disadvantages of a re-

researcher's presumed identity, is too simplistic and risks being essentialising. However, along with positionality, I argue that researchers need to adopt a reflexive approach which allows us to understand the socio-political context in which we are meeting with research participants (Carling, Erdal, & Ezzati 2014). Ethnicized positionalities are to varying degrees politicized or depoliticized in relation to other factors, like those discussed earlier in this chapter (Baser & Toivanen 2018). In the context of my study, I believe I was mostly seen as a 'friendly or benevolent outsider', but was also sometimes considered an 'honorary insider' (Carling, Erdal & Ezzati 2014; Baser & Toivanen 2018).

I was a 'friendly or benevolent outsider' to the majority of the informants because I showed an interest in their situation and they knew that I had written and spoken about family homelessness in public arenas previously. This also made me somebody whom they could ask for information and who could facilitate access to advocacy support, as I described earlier. As a majority of my respondents were recruited, directly or indirectly, through Save the Children networks, my association with this organisation made me someone who was perceived as having an interest in the well-being of children. The children were the centre of these women's lives. Furthermore, the fact that I am also a mother meant that we had something in common. For the women in this research, there were 'Swedish people' who represented organisations that were seen as 'friendly' in relation to their situation, which was contrasted with 'the unfriendliness' of social services as an institution, but not necessarily with social workers as individuals, as a distinction was made between those perceived as 'kind' and 'unkind'. In this sense, I belonged to the former category. The fault line between 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' was not necessarily drawn along ethnic lines, but was rather associated with 'respect' or 'disrespect', which is indicative of the importance of feeling that one is treated with dignity. This resonates strongly with previous studies looking at low-income single mothers' experiences of interactions with social services in other national contexts (Lavee 2017; Gupta & Blumhardt 2018; Liegghio & Caragata 2016).

I would argue that to show respect and treat people with dignity in a research context also involves adjusting to circumstances as necessary. It is easy for researchers to have idealistic ideas, and this of course also includes myself in my current role. Influenced by my previous experiences from co-produced research in the UK, at the inception of this study, I had envisaged a more participatory methodology where single mothers were actively involved in the research process (see Cohen et al. 2017; Haux et al. 2012; Samzelius 2011; Giullari 2007). However, I soon realized that the

living circumstances of the mothers I wanted to involve would not allow for such an approach to be developed. There was no time. As I have reflected on previously with former colleagues in the UK:

When we talk about co-production with communities, we need to take into account that 'time poverty' as well as the 'regulation of time' plays a role at community level and serves as a means to inclusion or exclusion from participation and engagement (Samzelius quoted in Cohen et al. 2017, p. 80).

This reflection was made in a context where I was a community representative engaged in a co-produced project involving single mothers in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and who were also members of the SPAN community. Activation through job search and training meant that those parents' time was more heavily regulated by statutory services than had previously been the case. If they were seen as using their time in 'the wrong way' or failed to turn up to a meeting (even if it was due to an emergency) they were at risk of being sanctioned, which could result in severe consequences. The reflection was also made in relation to my own time engaging with research while I was overseeing busy front-line services. With all the good intentions in the world, from our perspective, academics did not always understand the reality in which we were working. There would always be asymmetric power relations which needed to be accounted for and some of this had to do with the access to time as a resource.

In Sweden, the time of the participants in this research was even more regulated than it was for the women I had worked with in the UK. Some mothers were engaging in work-related activities for eight hours per day whilst also looking for housing and ensuring that their children were provided for. Others were working irregular hours. During periods of homelessness, they moved across large geographical areas of Stockholm, adding travel time to already busy schedules. Many were feeling exhausted. Their engagement in this research was dependent on me moving around according to their premises. A few of the mothers had lived in the same neighbourhood when I first met them and they knew each other, but as time went by they were dispersed to different corners of metropolitan Stockholm. Consequently, I had to modify my approach to the reality of the participants, in terms of both times and places where we met.

The ethnicity of researchers and participants can of course not go unnoticed, but ethnicized positionalities are operationalised differently depending on the political and cultural context. Why did I say earlier that I sometimes was seen as an 'honor-

ary insider'? Of course, it partly had to do with my status as 'friendly and benevolent', but I also believe that it had to do with my multicultural and multilingual background. I have lived and worked in a multicultural and multilingual environment for the best part of my life and speak five languages more or less fluently (Swedish, English, French, Spanish and Dutch). I have also lived among, and worked closely with, communities speaking languages such as Arabic, Somali, Tigrinya, Yoruba and Lingala for many years. Although I do not speak more than a few words of each one of those languages, I 'hear' them and I am used to being in environments where multiple languages are spoken simultaneously. My own experience of being a single mother with scarce resources also meant that I could relate to the time constraints, stress and anxiety of parenting alone with constrictions.

When I worked for SPAN I was the director of an adult education centre, where, among other things, we taught English as a second language. In my professional and private life I have always had to communicate with people who are not native speakers of the same language as myself. I feel comfortable and familiar within different cultural, religious and linguistic environments. Furthermore, the living circumstances and backgrounds of the women I engaged with in this research were not that different to those of my social and professional circles in the UK. When you feel comfortable in a place and are able to 'read' what people refer to in a wider cultural and societal context, it facilitates communication, the building of trust, and the ability to move between different spaces of knowledge production. Referring to Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) work on borderlands, Davis (2013) points out how she legitimizes a fluid space where women with multiple identities can mediate, navigate and translate from multiple spaces. Although Anzaldúa is specifically referring to the experience of Mestizas in the US, Davis argues that this can be related to feminist ethnographers who link knowledge production with methodological strategies that unravel issues of power and different forms of intervention. In this context we can, as academics, play a role of translating this knowledge in ways that can be likened with crossing borders.

## **Empirical material, analysis and presentation**

The experiences and the positionality of the researcher, as well as the relationships built throughout the research process, should all be considered important in shaping the final results (England 1994). However, ultimately, it is I, the researcher, who interpret, analyse and present the contextualized empirical material. Furthermore, I

was responsible for determining how to best proceed in collecting data, although this was also influenced by the participants, who decided where and when to meet and what information and written documents they were willing to share with me. The choice of methods in research, that is, how we proceed in collecting empirical data that we use in our analysis, is never just a simple process of gathering information, but is also framed within the wider context of the politics of poverty and representation. My intention was to look at the issue of poverty and homelessness with the views and experiences of the single migrant mothers at the centre of the analysis. This intent also informed how different methods were combined and the way I approached issues of power, responsibility and ethics.

I had more frequent contact with seven of the informants, while ten women were interviewed only once or twice. Among the mothers that I had ongoing contact with, there were those that actively called me to share experiences from meetings and that invited me to come along to visit 'housing options' suggested by social services and to other events. They also sent me pictures of hostels and other 'housing options' they had visited, and shared documents such as court decisions or letters from social services. In this way, they dynamically shaped the research process and turned it into a more ethnographic endeavour than a study with repeat interviews within given time frames. Without their active involvement in the process, my data would not have been as rich. Hence, with the seven 'case studies' I adopted a fluid approach where I combined formalized semi-structured interviews recorded verbatim with more informal conversations that I recorded in field notes. Those informants also offered me the opportunity to capture their experiences by 'being there' and becoming familiar with parts of 'their worlds' first hand (Gubrium & Holstein 1997). This has been invaluable to my deeper understanding of how income and housing insecurity impacts on every aspect of a family's life within a Swedish welfare context. It also meant that I was able to gain access to hostels and other temporary housing places in greater Stockholm and observe what these places are like and where they are situated. Those experiences also helped me when conducting the additional interviews, as I was able to relate to the environments that the mothers spoke to me about. Furthermore, this group of mothers shared a number of different documents with me and some of our conversations centred on those. This included paperwork from social services, medical assessments, letters from the National Insurance Agency and other forms of household letters. These documents were shared with me on a voluntary basis and with the understanding that I might use some of it within my analysis, but on a confidential basis. Together with other documents collated, such as social service guidelines, relevant strategies and policy documents from lo-

cal authorities in the region of Stockholm, they allowed me to identify key words/concepts and dominant ways of reasoning that were of importance in the mediated relationship between statutory agencies, such as social services, and the mothers.

With the additional ten mothers, I conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted between forty-five minutes and two and a half hours. I gave the mothers the option of meeting in a location that was convenient to them. Three women chose to come to Save the Children's office, one interview took place in a café in a shopping mall, two interviews in community venues where I had organised a space in advance, one in a mother's temporary home, two in the premises of other charities, and one outside on a bench. These interviews were recorded verbatim with a voice recorder or my mobile phone. The interviews were thematic in their form, but, as is often the case in semi-structured interviews, I allowed for the interviewees to determine what they wanted to say and how. As I mentioned earlier, my interviews commenced by an invitation to the women to tell me about themselves and their family. With some mothers, this led to a short introduction of themselves and their children, as was the case of Asma, Nora and Leila, while others began by telling me about their life journey. This also determined how I would proceed with the questions. Although I did not ask specifically about the women's journeys to Sweden, some women thought this was important to share. Other examples of topics touched on were housing/homelessness history, family circumstances, income, work and education history, contact with statutory agencies and voluntary organisations, children, and health and well-being. I also asked about the mother's perspectives on their situations, past, present and future.

All participants spoke good enough Swedish, English or French to engage with me in conversations, which helped in establishing relationships and trust. However, five participants opted for having an interpreter present when we conducted recorded interviews. In these cases I used an authorized interpreter who was present either in the room or over the phone. These interpreters had been briefed about the project before the interview took place. The same individuals were used for each language, that is Arabic, Somali and Tigrinya. Two of the women preferred to speak French with me in the interviews. Three interviews were conducted in English mixed with Swedish. I recognise that working with interpreters and in a multilingual research environment in qualitative research may have methodological implications (Wallin & Ahlström 2006; Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter & Östman 2010). The linguistic skills and qualifications of an interpreter are important, but as pointed out by Karin

Ingvarsdotter, Sara Johnsdotter and Margareta Östman (2010), a ‘technical fixity’ does not necessarily strengthen the credibility of the interview data. We also need to take into account broader issues of method and epistemology. Because of the nature of the topic studied, to me it was important that I felt confident that the interpreters understood the research intent and that they would engage with the informants in a non-judgemental manner. Power relations play a role also when involving interpreters.

Finally, the nine interviews conducted with professionals were also semi-structured and recorded verbatim. They lasted between forty minutes and one hour and were all conducted in Swedish. Here the focus was on the interviewees’ professional roles, in what situations they met with homeless families, what they saw as issues from their professional point of view, and their view on the situation of these families more generally. The purpose of these interviews was to contextualize the mothers’ experience and to support my analysis and interpretation when placing the mothers’ accounts within a wider societal and political context. As discussed earlier in this chapter, these interviews also allowed me to reflect on power relations and positionality in relation to homeless families over and above my own position as a researcher.

The quality of qualitative research is primarily assessed with reference to the paradigm, the epistemology and the specific discipline framing it (Morrow 2005). Although I had a stated overall aim with this research and questions that guided the process, the nature of the phenomenon under study has meant that I have had to take an explorative approach and work inductively, focusing on the interpretation and analysis of the data collected along the way (Hill, Thompson & Williams 1997). Such an approach is ‘exploratory rather than confirmatory, descriptive and comprehensive rather than explanatory, interpretative rather than nomothetic’ (Sousa 2014, p. 212). Another way of answering the question of how well my research design captures what I have set out to explore is through what Steinar Kvale (1997) has referred to as communicative validation. This is having the opportunity to discuss your interpretations with others that have knowledge on the topic. Throughout this research, I have been fortunate enough to be invited to conferences and meetings with representatives from social services, local politicians, civil society organisations and housing providers, and to academic settings, where I have been able to discuss and listen to different views on the questions under study.<sup>17</sup> In particular, this has helped

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<sup>17</sup> Examples of conferences and meetings are the 2019 conference with Sweden’s Association for Social Service Directors (*Socialchefsdagarna*), two workshops with the Research and Development Unit of the North Western region of Stockholm

me to understand and formulate the contradictions and tensions within which the experiences described by the mothers need to be understood.

All recorded interviews were transcribed by myself and became the starting point for my analysis, which was done from a content-theme perspective (Berg 1998). I also created case profiles documenting key features of each mother's life story, which helped me to visualise key emerging themes. The focus for the analysis was the accounts shared by the mothers, rather than those of professionals, as it was the mothers' experiences that were at the centre of the analysis. The process started off inductively, but soon took a more abductive form as there were a number of questions that appeared illogical or puzzling, not only to me but also to the mothers and the professionals that I was interviewing (see Dubois & Gadde 2002). The most apparent one was the suffering brought on to children and mothers and the indifference with which this seemed to be treated by public powers despite so much emphasis on the rights of children and women in Sweden. This prompted me to move back and forth between literature, empirical material and my own writing and notes through an ongoing reflective dialogue (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007).

There were some key features of my findings that, as far as I could tell, no previous research seemed to address, which also incited me to look both at the history of single mothers and social assistance in the Swedish welfare state and at how welfare conditionality and homelessness are dealt with in other national contexts. The sanctioning regime that made mothers and children destitute seemed particularly harsh and I had to find a way of understanding how and in what context these practices had come about. Another issue that puzzled me was the lack of safeguarding concerns. Throughout the research there were key breakdowns that led me to stop and ask further questions, prompting me to try to understand how social service practices that seemed illogical and counter-productive could appear commonsensical to social workers carrying them out. The question here was not who made the decisions and why, but rather how such practices could be condoned and justified. This was also a central concern to the informants.

As I explained earlier, this is a study that has been carried out in a multilingual environment and several languages have been used. In the cases where interpreters

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(*FoU Nordväst*), conference and discussions organised by the County Administrative Board of the region of Stockholm (*Länsstyrelsen Stockholm*), workshop with social workers organised by the Department of Social Affairs in the city of Stockholm (*Socialförvaltningen*), conferences and meetings organised by both tenants' organisations and housing corporations, and academic seminars and lectures held at Malmö University, Uppsala University, Stockholm University and Chalmers Institute of Technology in Gothenburg.

were used, the interpretations were between the languages spoken by the mother and Swedish. Transcriptions were made in Swedish, English or French by me. I have subsequently translated all the quotes used in the text into English. I have tried to be as close to the original interpretation or statement as possible; however, the published quotations from the transcribed material might be slightly processed in order to make them more readable. It is also important to recognise that interpretations between different languages are not always possible to do ‘verbatim’, that is, word by word, but that it is rather about trying to find a ‘conceptual equivalent’ (Squires 2009, p. 278). In addition, a person’s cultural background and coherence system will also play a role (Ingvarsdotter, Johnsdotter & Östman 2010) in how we understand what is being expressed verbally. This relates back to the earlier discussion about power and positionality and how such aspects influence the research process and relationships. Other factors than words are also important in any interview situation or meeting, for example, body language and emotional expressions. Where and when I have seen it as important to bring these non-verbal forms of communicating into the picture, I have written about it in the text.

Place names, or other markers, that could serve to identify interviewees, have been omitted or replaced (Trost 2005). The context of the Stockholm region is important for the understanding of some of the difficulties facing the mothers, but in which local authority or district a specific experience took place is less relevant for the purpose of this study. I have therefore removed such references, changing them to something more generic like ‘the council’ or ‘this municipality’. As the families moved around a lot, different neighbourhoods figure frequently in the stories, but since my aim is not to divulge the bad conditions or experiences of a certain place, I have removed names of neighbourhoods and names of hostels. In this way, emphasis is placed on the circumstances and experiences rather than the location. The names of the participants, their children and any other individuals figuring in this study, have been changed to protect their privacy and identity. I have, however, assigned aliases that reflect the diversity in origins of the mothers, social workers, teachers, health-care workers, charity workers, property owners, hostel workers, and other individuals figuring in the text. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of the spaces that these families pass through, as well as gendered relations, were important features of their experiences. Finally, as the material presented in this thesis is derived from both recorded and unrecorded conversations, I have clarified the distinction by putting ‘non verbatim’ within brackets when I use quotes that are written in my field notes rather than recorded.

## Concluding comments

In this chapter, I have introduced the women who have informed this research, both single migrant mothers with experiences of homelessness and housing exclusion and professionals who meet families in this situation in their everyday working environments. The mothers themselves identified multiple barriers to accessing adequate housing, which can be linked to both individual biographies and structural constraints.

I have also discussed how the political moment in which a feminist ethnographic research project of this nature is carried out will have an impact on power relations and give rise to a specific set of risks, both for the participants and for the researcher. In an era where society and its institutions put emphasis on individual responsibility, autonomy and choice, whilst engaging in a process of ‘de-responsibilisation’ of the welfare state, people in poverty are expected to navigate and negotiate an increasing number of risks associated with insecure housing and income.

To engage in research with communities that are suffering the potential risk of sanctions and destitution, entails both responsibilities and the need for a recognition of its implications. In this chapter, I have deliberated on the dilemmas and the responsibility that come with knowing. I have discussed the difference between having ‘power on behalf of’ someone and having ‘power over’ a person and what this means when we engage in the politics of poverty and representation. Drawing on my previous experiences from the UK, I have also argued that having ‘time’ is a resource, and how the suffering from ‘time poverty’ or ‘the regulation’ of one’s time influence one’s opportunities to engage in different aspects of public life. This is something, I have argued, that we also need to recognise as researchers, not only from an analytical point of view, but also when engaging with potential research participants. Finally, I have discussed my empirical material, the methods used and the analysis carried out.

## **FAMILY HOMELESSNESS IN A RECEDING WELFARE STATE**

This chapter will introduce the broader political-institutional welfare context within which the questions addressed in my research are situated. In particular, it will accentuate the link between social policies that emphasise self-sufficiency without redistribution and the response to family homelessness in Sweden. Furthermore, I will argue that the Swedish gender-neutral approach within social policy has led to contextually bound ‘poverty paradoxes’ and ‘blind spots’ that risk concealing situated inequalities and lead to a silent exclusion of the most marginalized single mothers and their children. I will begin the chapter by relaying the dilemmas facing a mother called Sophia. Her situation is used to illustrate how a work-first approach to self-sufficiency becomes intertwined with housing troubles in contacts with social services. Furthermore, it shows how the ideological construction of self-sufficiency as synonymous with ‘good parenthood’ risks leading to what Swift (1995) once referred to as ‘the manufacturing of bad mothers’. Subsequently, I will discuss how the migrant background of the informants needs to be acknowledged as a factor which puts them at a disadvantage, but also how other more systemic and institutional aspects which shape asymmetric power relations need to be accounted for when trying to understand the powerlessness the informants describe. Categorizations and definitions applied by statutory social services determine both working methods and assessments of who is judged as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of assistance. Finally, I will deliberate on how such judgements are shaped by the historical, political and institutional context as well as by whose knowledge is valued and believed within the community of individuals that are awarded epistemic authority. This, in turn, will also influence dominant political discourses and the counter-discourses, which impact marginalized individuals’ possibilities to cope and resist.

## Sophia's choice

Sophia was one of the mothers who had struggled with precarious housing arrangements since her arrival in Sweden in 2009. Initially she stayed in a refugee reception centre in the north of Sweden, but once she had been granted a resident permit she moved to the Stockholm area to be close to relatives. Sophia told me that initially it had been easy to find a sublet, but as the years went by she had found it more and more difficult to find a place to live. Over the years she had resorted to asking for help from social services several times. Initially, they helped her with a place in an apartment hotel where she lived for almost two years, until one day they said they would no longer help her to pay for the accommodation – she had to find somewhere to live by herself. Over the following year, she moved around, renting rooms from other families where she and her two children could stay temporarily. Each time she was asked to leave she went back to social services to ask for help again. For a few months she had been renting a self-contained room from a family, but they had now asked her to leave as they were having a baby. Sophia went to social services to ask for help but was told she could get none. The family agreed for her to stay two more months, but wrote on the contract that the time would not be extended again. Sophia described the room, that social services paid 7,500 SEK<sup>18</sup> for, to me as follows:

There is one bed on one side and two mattresses on the other side. My daughter sleeps in the bed and my son and I on the floor. During the day, we put the mattresses on top of each other to make space. When I go to the toilet in the middle of the night I have to use my phone as a torch so I can see and avoid stepping on my son.

In one of her meetings with social services, Sophia was given a handwritten note explaining her 'options' with regard to housing. This is illustrated in figure 1. She could stay put in the room she was now renting and her option would then be to continue to look for somewhere else to live. Or, if she decided not to stay, the following would be the consequence: 1) the social worker would take back a furniture allowance and rent paid for the room where she was now staying, 2) she would get no fur-

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<sup>18</sup> In July 2020, 1 Swedish Krona equalled 0.097 euros. Thus, 7,500 SEK was at this point equivalent to 727 euros. On the regular housing market in Stockholm it is possible to rent a two-bedroom flat within the old housing stock for an equivalent price. How the housing market works will be discussed more in detail in chapter six.

ther rent paid for any housing, 3) she and her children would have nowhere to live, and 4) her parenting capacity would be investigated by the child welfare team.

At the time, Sophia was attending Swedish language classes and was reliant on social services for subsistence. Sophia, like all the other mothers in this thesis, said she was not able to find a sustainable solution to her housing troubles. Social services told her it was her problem to solve by herself. Sophia said her children were suffering and social services told her it was her responsibility. If she was unable to solve it, the children could be taken into care. Who was wrong and who was

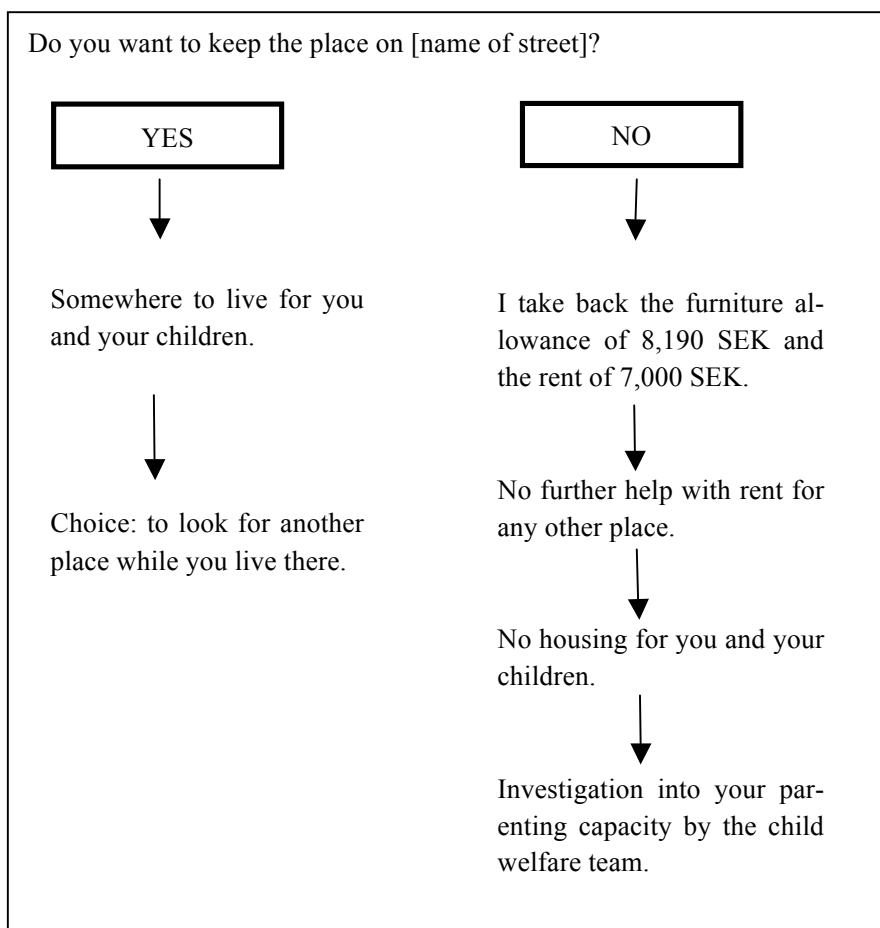


Figure 1. Sophia's 'choice'

right? Did Sophia have a real choice? Or was she simply asked to make a choice between two equally bad options – neither of which would present a solution to what she saw as her main problem: the lack of a home. Sophia's situation was not unique; many mothers told me of similar conversations with social workers and about what they perceived as deliberate intimidation and threats. The professionals interviewed confirmed this picture. The difference was that this time it was written down on a piece of paper. Sophia was asking the same questions as the mothers that I met at the meeting with the journalist that I wrote about in chapter three. Where were they expected to go? How would it impact on her children? Did children not have rights in Sweden? Why would nobody help them? Yet, the answer to Sophia's problems, she was told, was to get a job, and around the same time as the note was given to her she was told to come in and talk about work. She described her experience as follows to me:

She just said, 'We have nothing to do with your housing. We just need to ensure that you get into employment and take responsibility for yourself and your life'. Then I said, 'I don't need your help really. Stop my social assistance, my income. You can stop everything if you can just help me to find somewhere to live. If I have somewhere to live I can work, I can take care of myself. I can hardly even study now when I am homeless. This is my problem'. I told her, 'I don't want to talk about work or about my children. I want to talk about housing'. Then she said that I should come back for that meeting about work. She said if I haven't found somewhere to live by next month they will take my children.

Why was the social worker so reluctant to talk about housing with Sophia? How come she was emphasising work over housing? Why did she talk about taking Sophia's children into care? 'Why', 'how' and 'to what end' were these methods and practices favoured over others? Throughout this thesis, I will argue that in order to find answers to these questions, we need to place the individual's predicament within a wider economic and political-institutional context, which has served to further marginalize the most disadvantaged single mothers from accessing resources that are necessary for a minimum reasonable standard of living. Before shifting our attention to the core question of access to adequate housing, however, I believe it is necessary to discuss the role played by active welfare policies that emphasise individual responsibility and employment as the route out of poverty, from a single-mother perspective.

## **Intersecting disadvantages and powerlessness**

In Sweden, as well as in other countries, the migrant background of women who find themselves in marginalized situations is often put forward as the primary explanatory factor for their disadvantaged position. Ethnic, cultural or religious factors are used both by proponents of individualized labour-market interventions and by those more occupied with issues linked to structural discrimination. The migrant background was also an issue raised by professionals like Linda, an advocacy worker, who – when reflecting on the silence surrounding the predicament of homeless single migrant mothers and their children – answered:

I think this group as such – that is, the most vulnerable is an invisible group that are struggling to get heard generally. If it had been a white Swedish family I think it would have received more attention, but this is a different group that is not given much attention and...well, I think that is important, you know...it's a thankfully silent group in that way and they are not heard or seen very much.

In other words, low-income single migrant mothers are not a visible group in Swedish society generally, but, as Linda pointed out, they are also less likely to get heard when they do try to speak up. Linda's colleague Frida further suggested that the general difficulties in finding housing for this group were not made visible in social service notes and that instead the mother was blamed for failing to find housing. In this way, the structural constraints were erased and the mother's knowledge and experiences regarding the difficulties she encountered were discredited and silenced. A similar analysis was made by one of the mothers, Yasmin:

When we come to the council house there are rules and laws, but they can make decisions arbitrarily and nobody knows. The law can't say you have to treat them so and so, but they treat us like dirt! We can't claim our rights because there can be language issues. We don't have people who can help us. Our problems become isolated and the general public don't know what is going on. For me, politicians should represent what is right. But in this case when staff are abusive, take bad decisions, treat us unfairly...you know, someone has to say, 'Stop. What you are doing is wrong'. But there isn't. There is no politician that says, 'You are treating people badly'.

The migrant background of my informants clearly played a role in how they were treated and silenced, but from the beginning I felt that this alone could not explain

the injustice and suffering conveyed. Furthermore, on several occasions, mothers spoke to me about social workers, hostel staff and rough landlords who also had migrant backgrounds. Hence, ethnicity/race and gender could not be treated in separation from other power dynamics at stake. As I discussed at length in chapter three, when reflecting on positionality, the single mothers made a clear distinction between individuals who could be described as having ‘power over’ them as opposed to those perceived as having ‘power on behalf of’ them. To fully comprehend the power-inferior position of these families, ethnicity and migration histories need to be considered in relation to other asymmetric power relations.

Like Yasmin did in the excerpt above, the mothers mentioned problems like language barriers as well as direct, or indirect, racism. Those issues were always intertwined with feelings of resentment, humiliation and powerlessness linked to their low incomes, housing troubles and interactions with rough landlords or with social services around those issues. The mothers complained about not being taken seriously, a lack of respect, a lack of understanding for the situation they were in and illogical responses. When I asked Gloria to reflect back on her experiences over the 18 months that she was homeless, she said:

It has stressed me out. You feel humiliated. It’s like you have no value. It’s like you are abused morally, you know. Sometimes it’s like you are here, but you don’t have the same rights as everybody else. You feel completely dehumanized. I didn’t even want to live in Sweden anymore. I wanted to leave, but I couldn’t as I only have leave to remain and not citizenship. I had lost my love for Sweden. I found a lot of things in Sweden very negative. All of this just because I was unable to find somewhere to live. Before, I thought Sweden was good, but not anymore. There is no respect for children at social services. You know, from 10 o’clock in the morning until they close at 4 o’clock they let you sit there without attending to you. You send messages, you call and they never answer. When they close, you have to go to emergency social services and they put you up for the night. Then you have to go back to social services in the morning. You have to take the pushchair and your suitcase while the other child is walking next to you. Then again, you stay there the whole day... When they say Sweden is a country for women and for children. That they respect children and look after them. Well, for me this is not true.

In other words, the symbolic dimensions of poverty, which are about lack of voice, denial of human rights and diminished citizenship, were important (Lister 2004). This resonates with findings from previous Swedish research, where social service clients, irrespective of ethnic background, have described their experiences of the social assistance scheme as arbitrary, stigmatizing and humiliating (see e.g. Jönsson, Söderfeldt & Starrin 1996; Jönsson 2003; Angelin 2009; Ulmestig & Eriksson 2016). This suggests that, as pointed out by Norbert Elias and John Scotson (1984) in their classic study *The Insiders and the Outsiders*, a single focus on ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘culture’ is ‘symptomatic of an ideological avoidance action’ (p. xxiii). As such, it ‘turns the eye away from what is central’ (ibid.), namely, the asymmetric power relations and the exclusion of groups that are hermeneutically marginalized<sup>19</sup> and ‘Othered’.

In a recent book with contributions from scholars from across Western Europe, its editors Laurie C. Maldonado and Rense Nieuwenhuis (2018) introduce the notion of a ‘triple bind’ that affects single-parent families as they are disproportionately caught in the interplay between inadequacies in resources, employment and policies. When the combined impact of inadequate resources, employment and policies adds up, Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis argue, it limits the parents’ ability to ‘be’ and ‘do’, in other words, it can incapacitate their agency. According to this theory, the ‘triple bind’ thus puts single mothers like Sophia in positions where they are at risk of being confronted with irreconcilable demands or have to make a choice between two equally undesirable outcomes. This has prompted some researchers to ask if some forms of welfare conditionality set up vulnerable clients to fail (Reeves & Loopstra 2017).

In Sweden, research into welfare conditionality and activation measures targeting social assistance recipients have primarily focused on measures aimed at moving clients closer to the labour market (see Thorén 2008; Salonen & Ulmestig 2018). As exemplified through Sophia’s description of the encounter with her social worker, employment was a key focus in meetings between the mothers in this research and social services. However, the mothers also told me about different forms of activation requirements and sanctions that were related to being required to ‘actively look for housing’. Sometimes this was required alongside activities aimed at moving them closer to the labour market. In other cases, if the mother was on maternity

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<sup>19</sup> Drawing on Fricker’s (2006, 2007) theory of epistemic injustice, I use the term ‘hermeneutically marginalized’ to describe the denial of these women as ‘credible knowers’ due to their situation and power-inferior position. As their experience becomes obscured from a ‘collective understanding’, it also becomes difficult for them to ‘have a voice’.

leave, housing became the key focus of the activation requirements, also while she was caring for a new-born baby. As was described by Sophia, several mothers told me about being threatened that their children could be taken into care. This was a reoccurring pattern in the experiences shared, but I could not find any previous research into this. Nor could I find any guidelines, at either a local or a national level, stipulating the design of activation measures or sanctioning regimes targeting families that were supported with emergency accommodation through social services. How could this 'reality disjuncture', which appeared between what was written down in official guidelines and what I was told by my informants, be understood?

I propose that we need to place these experiences and 'reality disjunctures' within the context of the receding welfare state. The shift towards an emphasis on individual responsibility and active employment models in social policy, suggests simultaneous processes of 're-commodification' and 're-familiarization', which I propose are particularly challenging for low-income single mothers. De-familiarization is a concept used by feminist welfare scholars to capture the relationship between the welfare state and women (Orloff 1993; Lewis 1997a). It was introduced as a tool for a gendered deconstruction of the work of influential welfare scholars like Gósta Esping-Andersen (1990), whose typology of welfare states focused on the relationship between welfare policies and capitalism, with social class as the central variable for analysis. Esping-Andersen set out to consider the relationship between work and welfare, where work is defined as paid work and welfare as policies that permit, encourage or discourage the de-commodification of labour. De-commodification, in this regard, describes the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation, for example, when a child is born, in old age or when illness prevents an individual from partaking in labour-market activities.

Feminist scholars built on this conceptualization and argued that the possibility of opting out of a bad relationship could be discussed in relation to the importance of 'de-familiarizing' the welfare state (see Orloff 1993; Lister 1997). Women should not be dependent on family and friends to be able to escape domestic abuse and violence. In an attempt to capture this argument within the debates of the role of the welfare state, Lister has argued that de-commodification, or de-familiarization, should be seen as 'the degree to which individuals can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of family relationships, either through paid work or social security provision' (1994, p. 37). Re-familiarization refers to the opposite, where women are less likely to cope and form autonomous households without sup-

port of family. In a similar way, ‘re-commodification’ means that it is increasingly your ‘value on the market’ which determines your ability to uphold a socially acceptable standard of living (see Greer 2015). In my view, the ‘re-familiarization’ and the ‘re-commodification’ are interlinked with what I refer to as a ‘de-responsibilisation’ of the welfare state.

## **Activating single mothers**

There is a rich international literature that demonstrates the strong link between social policy and the lives of single mothers, notably in relation to their labour-market participation and risk of poverty (see e.g. Edwards & Duncan 1997; Lewis 1997b; Niewenhuis & Maldonado 2018). As reflected in my lived and practical experiences from the different contexts of Sweden and the UK, the comparative literature has showed how social policy and public institutions matter significantly in terms of poverty risks and the effectiveness of state interventions. Since the 1990s and onwards, we have seen a wave of welfare reforms aimed at moving ‘workless households closer to the labour market’ and dis-incentivising ‘welfare dependency’ across Western Europe and North America (van Berkel 2010).

Single mothers were specifically targeted in the design of these reforms in most Anglo-Saxon countries, but such an intent was not explicit in the case of Sweden. Whilst in Sweden single mothers were already expected to work, in the British welfare state they were primarily constituted as ‘mothers’ and exempted from the active work regime until the welfare reforms. As soon as New Labour came into power in 1997, they initiated a welfare reform programme motivated by active welfare, which is ‘the idea that rights afforded by the welfare system come with responsibilities on the part of the individual and an obligation to join the workforce when ready rather than remaining on benefits indefinitely’ (Smith 2013, p. 162). Two years later, the same government set an ambitious target to ‘end child poverty within a generation’. Parental employment and financial independence offering a productive role model to children was seen as key in achieving this aim. ‘Good mothers’ should work and the new ideology of ‘good parenting’ was supported by a host of policies which aimed to enable parents to take financial responsibility for their families (Goldson 2002).

On the surface, the active welfare policies targeting workless single mothers in the UK might appear far removed from the policy context of Sweden, where single mothers were already expected to work. However, there are some similarities as well as differences, which I will argue are particularly interesting when considering the situation of the most disadvantaged single mothers. In the early 1990s, Sweden was

hit by a deep fiscal and structural crisis and both left and centre-right governments introduced cuts in social spending. Some of the lasting effects of the welfare retrenchment that took place were the downsizing of social insurance and benefit schemes, pension reforms, and the end of full employment as a defining feature of the Swedish welfare state. Gradually, many key functions within the welfare state, for example, the care, education and housing sectors, have been de-regularized, decentralized and privatized in varying degrees. Sweden also saw a shift in labour-market policies from a more uniform approach to a two-tier system, where uninsured adults with means-tested benefits are referred to secondary activation measures encapsulated in a discourse of 'individual responsibility' and 'active citizenship' (Sainsbury & Morrisen 2009).

In line with other European Union member states, the Swedish Social Service Act was amended in 1998 and gave municipalities the powers to require participation in activation policy programmes in return for social assistance benefits (see Salonen & Johansson 1999). It also introduced the possibility of sanctioning non-compliance with individualized activation measures. The pressure on public finances had, as in other Western countries, led to a more intensive moralising debate framed around 'welfare dependency' and 'work shyness'. Furthermore, arguments were put forward that the demands on recipients were too low and the levels of benefits too high (Svallfors 1995; Bergmark 1996). This development was very similar to that in Anglo-Saxon countries, where, in the 1980s and 1990s, the American political scientist Charles Murray (1984) had reinvigorated the debate about a 'culture of poverty' in his highly influential work about 'the underclass'. 'The underclass', he claimed, reflected a type of poverty characterised by deviant attitudes towards work, crime and parenting. Single mothers were seen as the most vilified members of 'the underclass' in both the US and Britain, and in particular in the US this was cast in a highly racialized context where Black single mothers were described as 'welfare queens' (Christopher 2004; McCormack 2005).

Critics of Murray's approach have argued that its overemphasis on behavioural definitions lumps together different marginalized groups under one stigmatizing and fear-inducing label (Bauman 1998; Lister 2004). The British sociologist Lydia Morris has described the notion of the 'underclass' as 'an exercise in conceptual containment' (1996, p. 161). It offers a seemingly simple explanation and seemingly simple policy solutions to anxiety-provoking social changes. Whilst the debates were similar in Sweden, the groups primarily associated with 'welfare dependency' have come to differ. The fiscal and structural crisis of the 1990s was closely entan-

gled with the arrival of a large number of refugees, mainly from the war on the Balkans, but also from countries such as Eritrea, Iraq and Somalia. During this period:

The discourse on the welfare state and the discourse on immigration became more closely entwined than before, both in terms of what immigration meant for the welfare state in general and of whether the welfare state was good for immigrants themselves (Schall 2016, p. 124).

Today, ‘immigrants’ are the group in Sweden most commonly constituted as ‘undeserving’ poor and associated with ‘welfare dependency’ (Sahlin 2018). Women with foreign backgrounds have one of the highest rates of unemployment in Sweden, which is often raised as an issue in relation to Swedish gender equality policies. Models for explanations vary, but a consideration of barriers and constraints facing single migrant mothers is generally absent from policy documents.

Prior to the changes made to the Social Service Act, some of Sweden’s most prominent welfare scholars argued that there was little evidence that this type of policy would have any significant impact on its desired outcomes, as the receipt of social assistance was strongly linked to structural conditions on the labour market (Sunesson et al. 1998). In a governmental inquiry published prior to the legislative change, Åke Bergmark concluded that:

The problem with the calls, through activation, for a stricter work-first regime is that they are formulated without consideration for the existing knowledge about who the clients are and without any clear interest for the consequences of potential changes. The imagining that the reliance on social assistance in any significant way is a result of individual morality and activation requirements in case work lacks empirical grounding and is logically unclear. Research shows fairly unambiguously that the variations in social assistance uptake primarily are linked to the development on the labour market and other forms of social security offered through the welfare system. To unilaterally emphasise individual motivation or work ethic in a situation where unemployment is higher than it has been for several decades is, to speak plainly, either ignorant or directly dishonest (1996, p. 115).

Other commentators have also pointed out that this emphasis locates the problem in the behaviour of marginalized individuals rather than in mainstream society, which deflects attention from underlying unequal social divisions, relations and structural

causes. In this way, the problem of poverty becomes reframed as a behavioural threat of dependency and potential delinquency (Lister 2004). The point made by Bergmark about the disregard for who the social assistance clients might be, also meant that the potential impact on single mothers and their children was never fully assessed.

The contrasting historical policy approach to single mothers characterised by broader, more generalized social policies benefitting all families with children, i.e. accessible and affordable childcare, generous parental leave schemes and free school meals, is often used to describe why overall poverty rates have been higher among single-parent households in the UK than in Sweden. Yet, as pointed out by Marguerite Rosenthal (1994), it was the *combination* of work with welfare, at a level that provided a minimum but decent standard of living, that was the most determining factor. Furthermore, she pointed out that in 1985, forty per cent of all single mothers had received social assistance at some point during the year. Discussing Sweden in comparison with the US, where welfare was increasingly framed as in opposition to work, Rosenthal concluded that ‘subsidising work for public assistance will not remove most single parent families from poverty, and universal benefits, such as child allowances, are unlikely to meet the needs of the poorest of the poor, including those who work’ (1994, p. 276).

When Sweden moved towards a more residual welfare model at the end of the 1990s, welfare scholars warned about the potential impact on single-parent families when welfare was framed as being in opposition to work (Gähler 2001; Sunesson et al. 1998; Salonen 1993). Yet, not enough consideration appears to have been given to such arguments by law-makers, as poverty rates and the risk of poverty among single-mother families have continued to rise in Sweden over the past 20 years (Försäkringskassan 2019). The proportion of single parents (the majority of whom are mothers) with a migrant background and with low-income standards increased from 20 per cent in 1998 to 56 per cent in 2017. Swedish-born single parents have also been affected, with an increase in low-income standard from 9 per cent in 1998 to 27 per cent in 2017. During the same period, low-income standards among Swedish-born two-parent families have remained consistent at around 5 per cent (Försäkringskassan 2018). The gap between different household types is thus growing, which is also reflective of a general trend in Sweden where income inequality has increased rapidly since the mid-1980s (Salonen 2019).

Single mothers have been over-represented within the Swedish social assistance scheme since the 1960s (Salonen 2000). Today the largest contingency within this

group are single migrant mothers. They are also more likely than any other group to rely on benefits for longer periods of time, making their families particularly vulnerable to persistent poverty and deprivation (Stranz & Wiklund 2019). Furthermore, it appears to be more difficult for single mothers to exit social assistance completely after prolonged periods of uptake, compared to other households (Bergmark & Bäckman 2001; Gardberg Morner 2006; Stranz & Wiklund 2011, 2012). It seems that most factors sustaining reliance on social assistance are closely related to structural constraints linked to the labour and housing markets as well as the design of the general welfare system. According to Hugo Stranz and Stefan Wiklund, disadvantaged single mothers in Sweden are ‘captured in a welfare scheme distinguished by extensively addressing individual shortcomings’ (2012, p. 527). The social assistance scheme in Sweden is contextualized within the realm of social work and family/individual dysfunction, which these authors argue results in investigations and services that are primarily designed to address psycho-social conditions. However, their analysis, which draws on quantitative data on nearly 900 single mothers in receipt of social assistance, shows that the prevalence of psychosocial conditions is low, particularly among single mothers with a foreign background. Consequently, they raise the question whether traditional social work practices in Sweden are adequate for meeting the needs of this group and for offering suitable support.

## **Welfare divergence and retrenchment**

While many of the fundamental principles underpinning the early British and Swedish welfare states were similar, the gender regimes began to diverge in the 1960s. This also had an impact on the situation of single mothers and their children. The booming Swedish post-war economy opened up new opportunities for women, who were encouraged to enter the labour market. A crucial issue in the political debate of those days was whether women should have the freedom of choice to stay home, or the freedom of choice to work (Karlsson & Mattson 1990). However, by the end of the 1960s, the Federation of Social Democratic Women and Liberal feminists began to critique the ‘freedom of choice’ argument by pointing out that such freedom was an illusion for many women, particularly single mothers and women married to low-income men, as the majority of them were already working. They argued that single mothers worked longer hours than married mothers, and that the public childcare centres that cared for their children had the character of poor relief and lacked in quality (Winkler 1998).

The debates held by women activists in Sweden in the 1960s laid the foundation for what some have described as a ‘parent-worker model’, which became characteristic for the country (Lewis 1997b). Contrary to places where a breadwinner model continued to dominate, the central guiding principle of social policy towards single mothers in Sweden has, since the 1970s, been one of integration and inclusion with policies for gender equality and labour-market participation (Hobson & Takahashi 1997). In contrast, during this time, in the UK a large proportion of single mothers lived in poverty and faced discrimination when trying to access public housing, because of their status as ‘single’ and sometimes also because of their ethnic background (Cohen & Samzelius 2020).

Another important development in Sweden at the time was the large-scale slum clearance and public housing programmes, which were initiated by the Social Democratic government in the 1940s and scaled up in the 1960s. The emancipatory role of public housing for single mothers has received scant attention, but clearly played an important part in enabling them to form autonomous households. Up until the 1960s, the fostering and adoption of children of single mothers was still common in Sweden (Lundström & Sallnäs 2003). However, in Stockholm charities had opened boarding houses with childcare for working single mothers in the 1920s and 1930s. These establishments were a sign of a changing attitude towards children’s needs, unmarried mothers and the central role of housing and childcare for these households to be able to become self-sufficient. As the general living conditions improved in Sweden and it became easier for women to form autonomous households within the general housing stock, specialist housing for mothers and children were phased out or changed in character from the 1960s and onwards.<sup>20</sup>

What is important to recognise here, though, is that it was during the period when the overall standard of living improved for the population as a whole that single mothers also became invisible in Swedish welfare legislation. Yet, over the past thirty years, changes on the labour market have led to gender issues being eroded and intensified simultaneously (Fudge & Cossman 2002). On the one hand, shifts on the labour market have led to a convergence of female and male labour-market experi-

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<sup>20</sup> The trust *Fredrik Eens minne* still owns the same building in central Stockholm and according to its constitution it should provide housing for low-income women. There is also a childcare centre in the same building. However, the area of Kungsholmen is today one of the more affluent and desirable parts to live in Stockholm. When the Tenant Association’s magazine *Hem & Hyra* has tried to investigate who benefits from this, and similar housing trusts in central Stockholm today, it has become clear that numerous buildings and flats originally intended for families with low incomes are no longer used for this purpose and that most people registered on these addresses have middle or high incomes. See: <https://www.hemhyra.se/nyheter/bostader-for-fattiga-gar-fortfarande-till-rika/>

ences, which are more polarized in terms of class (and, in Sweden, ethnicity/race) than gender. On the other hand the intensification of gender is noted in that many women are concentrated in the care and service sectors, which tend to be low paid, precarious and often part-time (Bezanson 2006).

In Sweden, between 2003 and 2008, the share of single mothers in temporary employment increased from 12.6 per cent to 17.5 per cent, while it decreased for mothers with a partner from 11.8 to 9.6 per cent (Jaehrling, Kalina & Mesaros 2015). This means that single mothers are at greater risk of involuntary termination and have more unstable employment patterns. In a study comparing the outcome for single mothers in France, Germany, Sweden and the UK, Jaehrling, Kalina and Mesaros (2015) have argued that overall poverty rates among single mothers in Sweden are lower than elsewhere due to high levels of full-time employment. However, the relative low level of income benefits and income protection (through social assistance) makes them vulnerable and increases the risk of poverty in the event of under- or unemployment. Furthermore, although labour-market participation rates are constantly high, the risk of poverty in this group has risen sharply over the past twenty years. The authors suggest that this is an indication of the limitation of measures that rely solely on the income-raising effects of increasing labour-market participation.

More than two decades after the structural and systemic changes introduced in the 1990s, we are now able to evaluate their impact. A recent study conducted by Susan Alm, Kenneth Nelson and Rense Nieuwenhuis (2019), shows the link between welfare state retrenchment and the rising poverty of single-adult households in Sweden between 1988 and 2011. A nearly continuous decline in income replacement in the event of unemployment, coupled with more stringent qualifying conditions together with the rise in precarious work, have contributed to a sharp increase in relative income poverty among unemployed single-earner households (with and without children) in comparison with dual-earner households. Their results show unemployment rates disaggregated by household type between 1988 and 2011. Single parents were hit hard by unemployment in the mid-1990s. Although they are more likely to be employed today, unemployment is still proportionally higher among single parents in comparison with other groups, and although single parents were more likely to be unemployed in the 1990s, they were also less likely to live in poverty. It was in the beginning of the new millennium that poverty rates started to increase dramatically among single-adult households.

Alm, Nelson and Nieuwenhuis (2019) argue that the downsizing of old forms of income replacement policies stands in sharp contrast to the development of Swedish

work and family reconciliation policies, in particular parental leave schemes, that are mainly benefitting middle-class families and which have been further expanded. They suggest that the living conditions of single parents are also affected by policies, like those concerning income replacement, which are redistributed across both class and gender. Furthermore, those who fail to qualify for first-line benefit are forced to turn to the social assistance scheme for subsistence. There is clear evidence that the cuts in general social security systems initiated in the 1990s have resulted in a ‘shift in burden’ from general social security to the means-tested social assistance (Salonen 1997). Compared to other countries, Sweden has virtually no exceptions in the means-tested system. You cannot own anything, including a car or a flat, to be eligible for assistance. Neither can you have any savings for your children or in schemes set up by co-operative housing associations which give priority to part of the rental housing stock.<sup>21</sup> Assessments are based on a claimant’s financial situation rather than needs. Secondly, there is often a stigma attached to means-tested and selective benefits targeting the poor (Sunesson et al. 1998). The right to social assistance in Sweden is still built on foundations which support poor-relief logic and the idea that a relief can never be a right. Fundamental characteristics of the Swedish social assistance scheme are ‘the duty to accept any job and a willingness to relocate to find work, means testing, implementation of the right to discretion of local officials and sanctions if the claimant refuses any of the recommended measures’ (Panican & Ulmestig 2016, p. 485).

Since the 1990s, the cost of social assistance and its impact on municipal budgets have more and more become constituted as a problem (Hjort 2019). As a parallel development, the emphasis on self-sufficiency and ‘welfare dependency’ has contributed to a ‘re-stigmatization’ of unemployment and poverty. This has led some scholars to point at the risk of social work practices that are more focused on getting people off benefits than improving their life chances:

If social work is reduced to being a transit station for ‘the excluded’ on their way to ‘inclusion’, we argue that there is a hazard of not taking into consideration what the end station constitutes. This way of reasoning could then potentially justify

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<sup>21</sup> The largest Swedish co-operative housing association, HSB, offers priority rental housing for people who make monthly savings through their house saving scheme. One of the mothers in this study had started to save in this scheme while she was on maternity leave, as she thought it would help her to access secure housing. However, when she later had to apply for social assistance she was told that she had to use the savings from this scheme before getting any help, which meant that she would no longer be able to access housing through this route.

social work practices that for example enhances ‘employability’ in order to ‘include’ people into low-paid jobs under the banner of ‘welfare to work’ (Davidsson & Petersson 2017, p. 176).

This concern was also reflected in a study conducted by Katarina Thorén (2008), where she interviewed street-level social service staff in two different municipalities in Sweden. Although social workers that work with social assistance administration are not directly involved with the activation programmes, they play an important role as they link the eligibility for social assistance to the participation in activation measures. According to Thorén, the way this role was carried out was significantly impacted by political-institutional factors that put emphasis on caseload reduction and cost-cutting measures. Despite a political rhetoric focusing on self-sufficiency and the benefits of employment, staff interviewed by Thorén believed that politicians were more interested in caseload levels and costs than in the actual labour-market outcome for the individuals concerned. The political priority to reduce dependency on social assistance influenced managerial decisions, which in their turn had an impact on staff on the ground. One consequence of the political and managerial pressure to reduce caseload and cutting costs, was that caseworkers started to apply different assessment strategies to limit access to social assistance. Today, the same functions within social services are making assessments with regard to emergency housing.

## **Children – ‘blind spots’ in the activation regime?**

The importance of the recognition of the mother-child bond is a reoccurring theme in feminist studies that focus on anti-poverty initiatives involving single mothers (see e.g. Freeman 2017; Benjamin 2016). In Sweden, at the same time as stricter activation requirements were introduced for social assistance recipients, the principle of the best interest of the child was incorporated into the Social Service Act (Socialdepartementet 1997).<sup>22</sup> The best interests of the child is one of the fundamental principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which stipulates that ‘in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’. In the preparatory

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<sup>22</sup> On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020, the entire Convention was incorporated as Swedish legislation, but exactly what this will mean in practice is, at the moment of writing, unknown.

texts for the legislative change, which are often referred to as a guidance for interpretation, the following can be read:

The Government believes that every decision that concerns a child must be based on an assessment of what is best for that particular child. Various proposals for solutions need to be analysed and weighed against each other in a decision situation. The best interest of the child is not always decisive for which decision is made, but must always be treated with due regard, investigated and accounted for. The child's perspective is sometimes at odds with an adult perspective. However, children cannot be seen in isolation from their parents and parents cannot be seen as separate from their children. That the adults receive the best possible support through social service also lies in the child's interest. This means that the situation of children should also be taken into account when adults turn to social services with an application for financial or other assistance for the family (Socialdepartementet 1997, p. 100).

Despite a recognition of the interdependence between parents and children, several studies looking at how the best interest of the child is accounted for in social assistance case handling have concluded that the most common focus is to support parents to become self-sufficient. Those studies also show that decision-making and judgements can vary significantly from case to case and that the well-being of children becomes secondary to the activation of their parents (see e.g. Näsman 2019; Socialstyrelsen 2015; Fernqvist 2011). The Swedish sociologist Elisabeth Näsman (2019) has argued that the emphasis on employment is a dilemma with regard to the recognition of the needs and rights of children within the case handling of social assistance. This is an issue which has also been highlighted by the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2013) that has noted that children are at risk of becoming a means for putting pressure on their parents and steering them towards self-sufficiency. Näsman further points at numerous contradictions that arise both with regard to the asymmetric power relation between a parent and a child, as social services generally mainly communicate with the parent while ignoring the views of the child, and with regard to the emphasis on parental employment which risks discriminating against the child financially. None of these studies are specifically looking at the situation of homeless mothers and children, although the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2015) does point at the importance of safe and secure housing for a child. In their review of 300 case notes from three different

municipalities, they found that 15 per cent were living in some form of temporary accommodation paid for by social services. However, no further reflection was made on how decision-making in this area was intertwined with the emphasis on activation measures and labour-market participation. In a more recent study from the city of Malmö, it was also concluded that social services lacked in procedures for how to consider ‘the best interest of the child’ in relation to family homelessness (Staaf 2019).

The situation of children that are homeless has remained central in academic research in Sweden (see e.g. Andersson & Swärd 2007; Moreno et al. 2017; Björkhaugen Turesson 2019) as well as in reports published by the Children’s Ombudsman (Barnombudsmannen 2016) and Save the Children (Samzelius 2017). These studies and reports confirm findings from international research regarding the negative impact on children’s health, well-being, development and education (see e.g. Cutts et al. 2011; Meschede & Chaganti 2015; Bassuk, Hart & Donovan 2020). Although using child-centred theoretical frameworks, these studies have also interviewed parents. Yet the focus has primarily been on the situation of the children and, therefore, there is only a limited understanding of how these circumstances are perceived and experienced by mothers. Furthermore, the importance of how different social and institutional arrangements can serve to impede or enable mothers to solve their housing situation, is pushed to the back. As a result, topics like the role of the application of welfare conditionality within the social assistance scheme and its impact on the families concerned, have not received the same attention in Sweden as in Anglo-Saxon countries (Samzelius 2018). The knowledge about how, where and for how long these families live in different forms of temporary housing, in official or hidden homelessness, is also limited. Furthermore, studies involving children tend to focus on families with older children, although we know from local mapping exercises that some homeless families have very young children, sometimes new-born babies (Moreno et al. 2017; Stockholms stad 2019a). In greater Stockholm, health workers in family centres and children’s health clinics have raised concerns regarding the impact they see on very young children’s health, well-being and development (Rinkeby BVC 2017; Engqvist, Nyberg & Puga 2011).

In the present study, I have met some of the informants’ children, but I have not interviewed them as this was outside of the scope of this research. Furthermore, many of these children were under the age of five. However, the well-being of the children was very much at the centre of the mothers’ narratives and was also brought up in interviews with professionals. As in the case of Sophia, many spoke of situations where they had been questioned in their capacity as caregivers as a direct con-

sequence of their inability to solve their housing troubles. This was also brought up by the professionals interviewed. Julia, a legal advisor, explained to me that:

I have several cases, where there is a constant worry about children being taken into care. There have been many safeguarding notes and social services start investigations but then they conclude that there are no issues with the parenting. But they continue to feel worried. The threat that social services can take my children. Once I spoke to a girl. The child welfare team came to her school unannounced and started to ask her about her mother and if she is happy at home and things like that. I felt that she was very upset about it. She said to me, 'I love my mum and I want to be with her, but we have nowhere to live'. It is housing that is the issue, not the mum. She said, 'I told them I want a flat. I want somewhere to live'. To choose to take a child into care instead of helping with housing just seems the wrong way of going about things.

When I wrote the report on behalf of Save the Children, I interviewed children. Several of the teenagers expressed that they were worried about their mothers and siblings. It was also common that older children told me about how they tried to help with the online house searching and how this was constantly on their mind (Samzelius 2017). Homelessness and insecure housing seems to create new 'blind spots' or ethical dilemmas in Sweden, which can be linked to the 'poverty paradox' within social work that I discussed in chapter two (Cummins 2018). Children, like the girl referred to by Julia, are disadvantaged by pursuing their rights 'by proxy' through their mother, because she has reduced resources to pursue her citizenship rights (Clutton 2008). Sophia expressed this to me as follows:

I used to think about my children and my future. My children's schooling, that they should do well. I used to think about getting a job and a flat, but now I'm too tired to think. I can't even think about my children's future anymore. They are with me all the time, they see what is going on. They live my problems through me.

Hence, disregardless of the legal standing of the CRC, it appears that a distinction is made between children whose parents are cast as 'deserving' of assistance and children in families where adults are judged as 'undeserving' of support (O'Brien & Salonen 2011). Lister has captured this link between 'the poverty paradox' and chil-

dren's situation when she argues that while the rights stipulated in the CRC provide a resources for citizenship, it is still a right 'which is jeopardized by poverty and marginalizing social divisions' (2007, p. 705).

## **Excluded by definition**

Asymmetrical relations of power can, according to Fricker (2006), lead to the hermeneutical marginalization of a particular social group and thereby obscure a collective understanding of their social experience. Consequently, this can lead to a biased interpretation of the social experience of groups that are excluded from the community of people who can make claims to justice or who are granted epistemic authority. As I explained earlier, the *official* version of homelessness in Sweden, differs significantly from the *experience* of homelessness as related by participants in this research. Furthermore, as more families turn to social services for support, the question of their responsibility to offer help is becoming increasingly contested through more restrictive practices and municipal guidelines (Samzelius 2018; Björkhagen Turesson 2019; Sahlin 2020). Is it the individual parent's responsibility to secure housing, or does the municipality have a duty to assist? What is the role of the state? What happens when the parent is unable to find a viable solution? What responsibility does the state have to ensure that children are adequately housed together with their carers? These are questions that remain unresolved and contentious within the frameworks of the contemporary Swedish welfare state. Furthermore, despite a vivid debate in Sweden about 'the housing shortage' and 'a housing crisis', the voices of people that bear the brunt of this emerging crisis are largely absent from these debates. If the social experience of a marginalized group is excluded from our consciousness and if that same group is not represented or supported by people in more powerful positions, the likelihood that their needs go unmet is significant. Redistribution and the provision of affordable and accessible housing for people with different levels of income, are not just an economic issue – it is political, ideological and social. Indeed, as pointed out by the housing scholar Carina Listerborn in a book about housing inequality in Sweden:

When the housing question is de-politicised and simply turned into a market issue, it also becomes more difficult to make inherent contradictions between different actors visible. In order to get a debate which includes more equal parties, different sides of the housing inequality need to be made visible. Those that suffer the consequences of the housing shortage must become legitimate counter-voices to the

financially strong sector in order to balance the development of knowledge within the field of housing (2018, p. 20).

Without counter-narratives like the one presented through the perspectives of the mothers in this study, the consequences and effects of the current housing policies for those that are left in the cold remain hidden. We also fail to acknowledge how housing, labour-market and social policy are intrinsically intertwined, which allows for the development of narrow and individualistic interpretations that constitute labour-market participation as the single antidote to homelessness, as is illustrated through the conversation between Sophia and her social worker.

Skeggs (1994) has suggested that: ‘Feminist ethnography can contribute to a wider feminist project by giving knowledge a practical relevance and by exposing the constructions of knowledge as a form of control and categorization’ (p. 88). Furthermore, ‘it can bring into question universalistic or homogenous theories which speak from a position of privilege’ (ibid.). Mapping exercises of the homeless population in Sweden and other countries are examples of constructs that tend to favour a certain type of knowledge, despite facing various methodological problems and biases towards counts of sheltered or visibly unsheltered individuals. Those who remain out of sight during counts, or live in places or circumstances that elude official definitions of homelessness, remain undercounted (Brush, Gultekin & Grim 2016; Bassuk, Hart & Donovan 2020). Single mothers with children are, according to a growing body of evidence, one of the groups that are most likely to be excluded from official counts (Baptista et al. 2017). Women who are mothers tend to navigate the system differently and might more proactively try to prevent absolute (or acute) homelessness (Watson & Austerberry 1986). As a result, ‘hidden’ homelessness tends to be more common among women than men in general, and for those with children in particular (Klassen 2018). This might be a contributing factor to why the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare has raised concerns regarding the difficulties to retrieve information about families with children, despite having a directive since 2005 to include homeless families in their mapping exercises (Svärd 2018a). The latest official count, which was carried out in 2017, estimated that some 14,000-15,000 children experienced homelessness during the week that the counting was done. The number of families with children categorized as being in what is referred to as ‘acute homelessness’, had increased with 60 per cent in six years (Socialstyrelsen 2017). How many families that were further at risk of homelessness or who were facing precarious and inadequate living situations, is unknown.

How Sweden defines and understands the category of ‘homeless’ plays a significant role in how single mothers like Sophia are construed as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of assistance when they seek help from social services. Furthermore, it also defines who is counted as homeless at a given moment. For example, when Sophia was living in the small room that she was renting from another family described earlier, she did not count as homeless in Sweden. How many families live under such circumstances remains unaccounted for. Importantly, there is no statutory duty to assist families that present themselves as homeless in Sweden. Nor is there a coordinated family shelter system. How family homelessness is dealt with can vary greatly between different municipalities. In the city of Stockholm it can even differ between districts (Stockholms stad 2017). In a court ruling from 1990 (RÅ 1990 ref 119), which is seen as a precedent in appeals regarding the right to housing assistance, it is stated that ‘housing of a certain minimum standard’ should be seen as included in the concept of a ‘reasonable standard of living’. It further stipulates that ‘the assessment of how this dwelling should be provided and where it should be located can only be done on an individual basis, taking into consideration the circumstances of the person seeking support and the resources available in each municipality’. This leaves it open for municipalities to interpret their duties as they see fit (Samzelius 2017).

Methods used to define family homelessness and to count the families, have far-reaching effects on how many families are eligible for critical resources. Here categorizations and definitions play an important role in defining who becomes ‘visible’ and who is ‘invisible’ in the official language of homelessness. In Sweden, the definition used by the NBHW includes four categories, or situations:

1. **Acute homelessness** – An individual that is in some sort of emergency accommodation, for example, hotel, hostel, night shelter or women’s shelter. It also includes people sleeping rough or in public spaces.
2. **Institution or supported housing** – An individual who is in prison, a residential assessment unit or a foster placement and who is due to be discharged within three months and has no housing arranged.
3. **Long-term housing solutions** – An individual who is housed in a flat provided through social services because they are unable to secure a flat on the open market. It could for example be a ‘trial flat’, a ‘social contract’ or another form of municipal contract. Residents have some form of temporary contract, which often includes conditionality clauses.

4. **Short-term self-arranged solution** – An individual lives temporarily and without a contract with family or friends. Or they live in a sublet flat or as a lodger with a contract that will expire within the next three months and have therefore turned to social services for assistance.

Despite this definition covering a broad range of situations, many municipalities only include the first category in their homeless counts and, more importantly, some only see it as their duty to offer over-night or very short term emergency assistance. How families are dealt with is determined at a local level and at the discretion of social services. There is no duty to assist families that are at risk of homelessness, and in the region of Stockholm this means that a majority of families are told to come back on the day that they are destitute if they have been unable to find an alternative solution.

During the 1990s, the responsibility for homeless people was gradually transferred to local social welfare boards, although they cannot provide or influence the allocation of regular housing. This meant that homelessness became constituted as a ‘social’ problem rather than a problem of access to adequate housing (Sahlin 2004). This development continues to play an important role today and has laid the foundation for some of the problems experienced by my informants. As more people that are not seen as having additional social problems present themselves as homeless, they are now categorized as ‘structurally homeless’ (Socialstyrelsen 2019). Or, alternatively, they are described as not belonging to the group of ‘especially vulnerable’ social service clients. Whether this group is ‘deserving’ of support or not, and through whom, has become an increasingly contentious issue. Labels for people to whom selective rights are ascribed are often contested, as the state, or in the case of social assistance in Sweden – the municipality, might want to delimit the scope of their designation for financial reasons. How this question is dealt with varies in different municipalities. Local definitions can also differ from the one provided by the NBHW. For example, family homelessness as defined by the city of Stockholm is when:

Families or single persons in charge of children under the age of 18 that lack their own or rented accommodation and who do not live with a stable sublet or lodging contract and therefore are forced to seek temporary accommodation. Also families or single persons with children that are temporarily staying in an institution, a foster home placement or other form of institutional care and lack stable accommodation at exit (Stockholms stad 2019a, p.14).

Families that double up with relatives or friends are not counted as homeless according to this definition. The following extract from a presentation by the Social Services Housing Support Team in the municipality of Sundbyberg (Sundbybergs stad 2017), can serve as an illustration for how many municipalities in the region of Stockholm reason with regard to this matter. The presentation described who has the ‘right to housing’ as follows:

- Be completely homeless (to be ‘roofless’)
- The individual should, according to their ability, have taken responsibility for their own situation and demonstrate that they have exhausted all their options of sorting out their own housing.
- Have special difficulties in finding housing on their own. This refers to special difficulties for the individual (lack of ability), not general difficulties that exist in a city with a housing shortage.
- Belong to an especially vulnerable group that need specific support to procure housing.

More importantly, the presentation further explains that:

- Families with children, immigrants and those with low incomes do not belong to the group ‘especially vulnerable’.
- Landlords’ requirements with regard to, for example, secure employment, income and references does not mean that the condition ‘especially vulnerable’ is fulfilled.
- Under certain conditions, a refusal of further support may be justifiable on the grounds that the person must also try to find housing in another locality.

In a report issued by the city of Stockholm on a similar theme, it is stated that ‘Especially vulnerable groups are usually those with long term substance misuse/addiction, mental health issues or another condition which results in a long-lasting disability’ (Stockholms stad 2019a, p.14). However, Stockholm does have a ‘roof over the head guarantee’, which means that (at least in theory) families with children should be offered emergency assistance if judged as qualifying and ‘deserving’. Exactly what this emergency assistance should look like is not defined, but it is judged on a case-by-case basis. How it is experienced by those that have asked for help, will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

## Why definitions are not neutral

In a comparative study into the nature and dynamics of family homelessness in Europe, published by The European Observatory on Homelessness (Baptista et al. 2017), the difficulties of retrieving data on family homelessness are discussed. In this report it is noted that the UK is the only country with a statutory specified system designed to intervene when family homelessness occurs. This also means that there is administrative statistical data on homeless families seeking assistance under a supportive legislative framework.<sup>23</sup> Priority housing is given to pregnant women and adults with accompanying children who qualify as ‘legally homeless’. In contrast to Sweden, municipalities are legally obliged to offer both short-term and long-term support in what is often described as a unique model.<sup>24</sup> The contrasting legislative frameworks and statistical methods used to gather data in Sweden and the UK result in rather different perceptions of the nature and extent of family homelessness in each country. In the UK, families seen as ‘structurally homeless’ in Sweden would be seen as in priority need, while in Sweden most of these families are only entitled to limited forms of temporary emergency assistance. Thus, definitions are not neutral, but will depend on which explanatory factors are emphasised and which policies and measures are used to deal with this matter. For ten years, I worked within the UK model and it was the contrasting experience of the British and the Swedish systems that prompted me to reflect on what I saw in Sweden. The lack of housing for families on low income is a growing problem in both countries, but the discourses surrounding it and policy responses differ significantly. This suggests that what we are seeing is an international trend that takes localized forms.

As pointed out by Suzanne Fitzpatrick and Hal Pawson (2016), changes to policy and assessment models can have a great impact on the numbers of officially homeless. Mary Murphy (2019) makes a similar argument when she states that single mothers’ need for social housing in Dublin is made invisible through changes to the legislation constituting what type of housing tenure homeless families should be looking for. Although categorization and different types of assessment models are necessary in social work, they need to be treated with care and with the awareness of what they mean for how individual situations are determined and judged. In a recent study looking at the situation of homeless families in Sweden’s third largest city,

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<sup>23</sup> For more information regarding rules on access to emergency housing through the council in the UK see: [https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing\\_advice/homelessness/rules/emergency\\_housing\\_if\\_you\\_are\\_homeless](https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/homelessness/rules/emergency_housing_if_you_are_homeless)

<sup>24</sup> For more detail around the history of the British model see Fitzpatrick and Pawson (2016).

Malmö, Annelie Björkhagen Turesson (2019) discusses the potential impact of the changes to guidelines regarding the assessment of and the assistance to families seen as ‘structurally homeless’ introduced in the city in May 2019. These changes have resulted in an approach similar to the one that was already applied by many municipalities and districts in and around Stockholm. However, as pointed out by Björkhagen Turesson her and her colleagues’ research showed that the distinction between ‘social’ and ‘structural’ homelessness cannot be made as readily as those guidelines assume. Furthermore, she points out that it is contrary to the Social Service Act which stipulates that the municipality has a duty to ensure that children and young people grow up under safe and secure circumstances. An immediate effect of these changes was, however, noted in the steep decrease in the number of homeless children counted in the yearly official mapping exercise from 1,347 in 2018 to 692 in 2019. Officials from the municipality could not give an answer to where these families had gone, but argued that they had improved their working methods. Excluded from these figures were also 1400 children who lived with their families in long-term temporary accommodation with so-called social contracts provided through social services (Wahlgren 2019).

There are no official figures available for the whole region of Stockholm, although municipalities across the region identify homelessness and housing exclusion affecting families with children as a problem in their area. The city of Stockholm conducts a mapping exercise every two years. In the latest one conducted by the municipality of Stockholm in April 2019, 50 per cent of the families recorded were headed by a migrant single mother who had children living with her all of the time. The report confirmed that ‘women tend to be overrepresented within structurally caused homelessness’. Furthermore, it stated that ‘women are more likely than men to live with their children also when they experience homelessness’ (Stockholms stad 2019a, p. 13). The mapping exercise conducted by the city of Stockholm, showed that 73 per cent of the children in the families reported as homeless were under 12 years old. 37 per cent were very young – between 0 and 5 years old. 72 per cent of the families only had 1 or 2 children, and almost half of them – 44 percent – only had one child. Similar patterns were reported in a mapping exercise conducted by the Research and Development Unit North West<sup>25</sup> (*FoU Nordväst*) during two weeks in 2019. During this period, the six participating municipalities reported that

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<sup>25</sup> FoU Nordväst is a research and development unit jointly funded and managed by a cluster of eight municipalities in the North West region of Stockholm – Ekerö, Järfälla, Sundbyberg, Sollentuna, Solna, Sigtuna, Upplands-Bro, Upplands-Väsby. Solna and Sigtuna did not participate in the mapping exercise referred to in this study.

53 families with 123 children were ‘acute homeless’ and that the majority were temporarily placed in hostel accommodation. 70 per cent of the families recorded as homeless were headed by a single migrant mother (Mönefors Berntell & Åberg 2020).

Official family homelessness has increased gradually over time in the city of Stockholm and its surrounding municipalities. However, the figures are only based on information regarding families known to social services during one or two weeks in 2019, which means that it only offers a snapshot of families that have been homeless over one year. This data excludes families with children that are long-term but still temporarily housed, through Stockholm’s own social housing scheme, referred to in short as SHIS, which will be described in chapter eight. As I discussed earlier, it also discounts a potentially significant group that are living under precarious housing conditions. How many those are is unknown, although the high levels of severe overcrowding in certain areas of metropolitan Stockholm should be seen as indicative of insecure and unsuitable housing conditions (Boverket 2016).

Mapping exercises and official statistics also fail to capture homelessness trajectories over time. Most research into ‘long-term’ or ‘chronically’ homeless have historically lacked a gender analysis (Baptista 2010; Mayock, Sheridan & Parker 2015). However, as more attention is given to the importance of a gender-sensitive approach, there is a growing body of evidence that there are several gender-specific experiences that shape women’s efforts to find stable housing. In an Irish study that looked at the experiences of long-term homeless women, it was found that key dynamics driving the ongoing homelessness included ‘women’s role as mothers, the (often violent) relationships where they seek refuge and their particular interactions with institutional spaces’ (Mayock, Sheridan & Parker 2015, p. 878). As they were trying to solve their situation, the boundaries between housing and homelessness became increasingly blurred when the women were transiting between sites of official and hidden homelessness. The authors of this paper argue that:

Rather than ‘chronically’ homeless, the lives of the women whose stories are documented...are better framed as multiple ‘journeys’ through places, systems and institutions, and the dynamics of their homelessness more accurately understood as a complex pattern of movement through precarious housing and ‘hidden’ homelessness (ibid. p. 893).

Importantly, the women's accounts suggested that the conditions and the experiences of being homeless had an impact on decision-making and strategies used in their struggles to secure housing.

## **Powerlessness and the 'welfare vacuum'**

As I explained in previous chapters, one of the most challenging aspects of this research, but also one of the key motivations for undertaking it, was the immense pain and suffering expressed that I became witness to. Having a significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding, or being denigrated as insignificant, often results in feelings of powerlessness (Fricker 2006). 'Why should I have to feel so helpless?' was a rhetorical question asked by Sama when she spoke about her situation and attempts to get support. Asma expressed similar feelings when she said 'You know Tove, sometimes I feel so powerless, but it is the Swedish system'. Others expressed anger and resentment, like Yasmin who said 'I was very sad and upset...it was not only the housing situation...I started to think badly about Sweden – about how I was being treated by those individuals. It made me feel angry and dislike Sweden'.

As I have highlighted in this chapter, the experiences shared by the mothers as well as by front-line practitioners need to be analysed within the context of a receding welfare state, where there is a latent expectation that individuals should seek to solve their basic needs through the marketplace. As maintained by Sunesson and his colleagues (1998), when the welfare state recedes, its more vulnerable members become more dependent on primary networks for care and subsistence. This process, they argue, is not gender neutral, but will disproportionately affect women who are carers. Those with limited resources and weaker social networks will struggle the most to maintain a reasonable standard of living without support. It is this process that feminist scholars have referred to as a 're-familiarization' of the welfare state. Discussing the impact on care of the elderly, Sunesson et al. pointed out that:

In the first phase of this development, the outcome seems to be dependent upon good will and practical possibilities, inherent moral obligations rather than guarantees. This phase could be followed by a development that openly forces families and relatives to take over caring work (1998, p. 25).

However, in the case of Sweden, they claim, a 'welfare vacuum' seemed to develop in the wake of a reduction in services. It could be argued that a similar 'welfare vac-

uum' has appeared with regard to housing for low-income people and that the response has been to transfer the responsibility over to the individual and their social networks. Access to housing is a problem for many groups in the Swedish society, but they will be more or less able to solve their predicament through contacts and family (Listerborn 2018). Parallels can be drawn to the impact of the rapid increase in family homelessness in the US in the late 1980s. During this time the American public health expert Roderick Wallace (1990) suggested that the housing shortage affecting low-income families could be represented as a form of famine, defined as a severe lack of any essential resource needed to sustain a population. Wallace found that low-income-housing loss and scarcity, social disintegration and homelessness in American cities fit well with the famine paradigm because of the social devastation it created. The lack of housing forced families to double or triple up with friends and/or family in overcrowded apartments. This in turn put a strain on social networks and 'after varied periods of time, depending on the numbers of relationships and the severity of the housing crisis, some families will entirely "use up" their supports and be forced to turn to public shelter' (Wallace & Bassuk 1991, p. 489).

Together with Bassuk, Wallace (1991) pointed out that the lack of adequate supports appeared more common among single mothers with children than among other groups. These families had fewer essential and personal domestic resources and were more vulnerable in a progressively deteriorating housing market. Family disruption, estrangement and domestic violence were suggested as underlying factors. These findings are also reflected in a Swedish study that focused on survivors of domestic violence that needed social assistance through social services. The authors suggest that poverty and lack of support networks appeared to be an underlying cause of an over-representation of women with migrant backgrounds in shelters for survivors of domestic abuse. These women were also described as more likely to experience difficulties in understanding how the system works and in communicating with social workers, due to language barriers (Ulmestig & Eriksson 2016). Difficulties which further suggest that they risk finding it more challenging to solve their housing needs when exiting a shelter. This also fits with the assertion of Wallace and Bassuk who argued that 'it is those who are poor and have inadequate social support networks who may be most and first affected' (1991, p. 496).

Yet, mothers like Sophia were regularly told that they had to ask their family or friends for help with housing. On various occasions this was also written in decision letters where mothers were referred to 'their social networks' for assistance as they were not judged as eligible for help through social services. As I will discuss more in-

depth in subsequent chapters, the mothers maintained that their family and friends were unable to offer them more than a temporary roof over their head. Furthermore, the more they were pushed to ask primary networks for help, the more likely they were to eventually become destitute as had been the case of Hanna whom I met when she was staying with a stranger. Such appeals were often ignored, or questioned, as was the untenable situation that Sophia was facing and which I described in the beginning of this chapter. As argued by Yasmin, when they tried to contest what they saw as an unfair treatment, it was difficult to get heard by those in positions of power.

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have discussed why family homelessness in Sweden needs to be placed within the broader context of a receding welfare state and widening inequalities. The migrant backgrounds of the mothers made them particularly vulnerable in this context, but to predominantly focus on this would, as argued by Elias and Scotson (1984), be symptomatic of an ideological avoidance action. Their vulnerability also needs to be understood in relation to the political-institutional developments and asymmetric power relations that shape their experiences. Having worked and lived in the UK during the implementation of welfare reforms targeting lone parents made me interested in the impact of activation and sanction measures. However, as I have discussed at length in this chapter, it appears that the ‘invisibility’ of single mothers within Swedish welfare legislation has meant that there has been less interest in investigating these matters from a ‘single-mother perspective’. Yet, I argue that these policies and the ideological ideas underpinning their implementation are paramount for understanding the processes that contribute to children becoming ‘blind spots’ in the meetings between social services and homeless parents.

When the welfare state recedes, secondary networks are indirectly expected to fill the gap. However, as international research has showed, in the area of housing, the doubling or tripling up with family or friends, erodes relationships and often exacerbates the vulnerability of already disadvantaged families. In this chapter, I have discussed how the Swedish approach to family homelessness excludes many vulnerable families by defining them out of the category of official homelessness and of groups granted legal protection, thereby increasingly designating them as ‘undeserving’ of long-term support to secure adequate housing. The ‘triple-bind’ of inadequate resources, employment and social policies in areas of housing and cash transfers in combination with the hermeneutical marginalization of single migrant mothers, thus appear to lay the foundation for suffering and injustice.

# INCOME INSECURITY

This chapter will introduce the theme of income insecurity among single parent households in general, and among single migrant mothers in particular. Income and financial resources are often central in discussions about poverty, particularly in those focusing on questions of redistribution. However, as pointed out by Lister ‘income is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself’ (2004, p.7). What standard of living are we able to achieve and how? What kind of a life is a person able to lead and what choices and opportunities are open to her when leading that life? What does the growing gap between the incomes of those that are worse off and middle- and high-income earners in Sweden mean for the households that are left behind?

In previous chapters, I discussed the ideas underpinning current approaches to welfare where individual responsibility and self-sufficiency through employment are increasingly construed as the single route out of poverty. I also highlighted the increase in poverty among single-earner households in Sweden and how single mothers are at risk of being caught up in the interplay between inadequate resources, policies and employment. In this chapter, I will develop this further through relaying the experiences and challenges described by single mothers themselves. Whilst policy-makers continue to put emphasis on the importance of work, other issues tend to be downplayed or discussed in silos – issues such as how opportunities are intertwined with the negative impact of reductions in targeted social transfers, changes to social security schemes, housing troubles, and, poor working conditions. However, for marginalized single mothers all of those issues are interrelated within the struggles they face on a daily basis.

I will begin this chapter by describing the varied and transitional sources of income that the informants told me about. I will use the experiences of Asma and Al-

ice to illustrate how the transitioning between different sources of income can be extremely challenging when a single mother has nothing to fall back on. Then I will move on to discuss the issue of small debts and the role of education, incorporating the experiences shared by several informants. The circumstances related challenged common stereotypes about ‘passive welfare subjects’, as the informants are using a range of strategies both to solve everyday struggles and in their attempts to improve the situation they find themselves in (c.f. Wright 2012). Through the narratives shared some of the weaknesses in the Swedish basic income protection scheme come to the fore illustrating the difficulties that can arise for the individual families affected.

## Sources of income

Since arriving in Sweden, and/or becoming single mothers, the primary sources of income of the participants had fluctuated between social security based payments on a basic rate through the National Insurance Agency, salary through employment, means-tested social assistance through the municipal social services, and student loans through the Swedish Board of Student Finance (*CSN*). Only one woman had qualified for an unemployment insurance scheme based on her previous employment. The others that had been employed, had worked on a part-time basis, on zero-hour contracts or had not worked long enough to qualify. One woman had a one-year paid position through the Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*) when we met, something which would temporarily qualify her for a low level of unemployment insurance when the contract came to an end. Eight out of the seventeen mothers in this study were on maternity leave during periods when they experienced acute homelessness. This is significant, because at the same time as this is often seen as a period where both mothers and babies are vulnerable, for some of the mothers it meant that they were deemed ineligible for support with emergency accommodation due to having an income. Other complementary sources of income through transfers were universal benefits such as child allowance, and, targeted and means-tested benefits like child maintenance and housing allowance.<sup>26</sup>

As I discussed in chapter four, the combination of work with supplementary welfare payments has been an important explanatory factor as to why poverty rates have

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<sup>26</sup> The different sources of income (apart from employment), rules regarding receipt, and, level of replacement are listed in the appendix. The different benefits, allowances, grants and loans listed there are those mentioned to me by mothers in interviews and sometimes showed through paperwork.

been lower among single mothers in Sweden than among their British counterparts. Without social transfers and means-tested benefits 73 per cent of all single mothers with two or more children would have a low income standard in Sweden (Försäkringskassan 2018). However, since the end of the 1990s, the redistributive effect of social security benefits aimed at families with children has been reduced and it also appears to have become more difficult for single mothers to top up their earnings with social assistance (Jaehrling, Kalina & Mesaros 2015). While spending on universal and income-related benefits such as the parental leave insurance has increased, the eligibility criteria as well as spending on the means-tested housing benefit and child maintenance have been squeezed. To some extent this has been a consequence of a reduction in redistributive cash transfers following from a slow up-rating of such benefits in line with wages, but also changes to eligibility have had an impact. For example the number of families with children that were in receipt of housing allowance in Sweden was reduced from 428,000 in 1995 to 148,000 in 2017 (Salonen 2019). This reduction was due partly to the rule changes implemented during this period and partly to the fact that incomes increased at a faster pace than the income limits for the allowance. In 2018, 57 per cent of the total expenditure on housing allowance was paid to households headed by a single mother (Försäkringskassan 2019). However, as I will discuss at length in this thesis, the housing allowance does not always reach those that are the most marginalized. Furthermore, because of the way the housing allowance is designed, overpayments which result in debts are common among families with insecure incomes and housing situations (Riksrevisionen 2018)

Swedish policy has strongly promoted shared parenting combined with professional care for several decades. This care ideal advises mothers and fathers to equally engage with their children (Forsberg 2009). While thus encouraging gender equality, this ideal tends to make invisible the social constraints facing single mothers as it assumes a ‘dual earner/dual carer family model’ (Roman 2018). Research in Sweden involving single mothers who have their children living with them all the time (disregarding of ethnic background), and who work with zero-hour or part-time contracts in the caring or service sector, has showed that they are particularly vulnerable to experiencing time poverty and stress due to their life circumstances. They are also less likely to be able to make use of allowances to care for sick children or holiday entitlements than women with permanent professional jobs (Malmqvist, O’Hanlon & Pralica 2017; Roman 2018). Nevertheless, despite significant changes to the Swedish social security system, and to labour and housing markets, since the 1990s, the

primacy given to labour market participation as the route out of other problems remain strong among many members of the political elites. This can be illustrated by the following statement, made by the former Social Democratic Minister responsible for gender equality and children Åsa Regnér, in a debate about homeless families in the Swedish parliament in June 2017:

From a child rights perspective it is important that parents with minors receive support to enter the labour market. Parental employment bring many positive effects for children. It improves the family's economic situation and contributes to positive repercussions also in other areas, for example the possibility to get stable and secure housing (Sveriges Riksdag 2018, p. 2).

Towards the end of the interpellation debate she reiterates the same message again by saying that:

I believe, and I think we are in agreement on this point, that employment and income for parents is important. It is equally important for fathers and mothers. Then you also need to get all sorts of support to be available to the labour market. Therefore it is important for the government with initiatives regarding adult education and other actions to move people closer to the labour market (ibid., p. 6).

All of the mothers who participated in this research agreed with the Minister that employment is important. However, in their experience it was not as simple as saying that it is the determining factor with regard to solving an insecure housing situation in the region of Stockholm. Seven out of the seventeen mothers were working when I met with them and others had a long employment history, but were on maternity leave. Furthermore, regardless of their educational background, all those with a current or past employment record worked in industries where part-time and zero-hour contracts were common. They worked in the care sector, in cleaning or in the service sector. Among those not working or on maternity leave, all attended adult education classes and/or were actively looking for work. This was a requirement for the receipt of social assistance, but it was also something the women themselves described as a route to a more dignified life situation. The perspectives and experiences shared by these mothers were in many ways contradicting the narrative of 'passive' welfare subjects that are 'dependent' on benefits. It also contradicted the view that employment was the answer to their housing troubles. The barriers they were facing appeared more multifaceted and complex.

## Asma's troubles

To make the financial difficulties and barriers facing a mother who has ended up destitute more comprehensible, I will begin by telling Asma's story. Her example illustrates the difficulties that can arise when someone is transiting from one source of primary income to another. Asma came to Sweden in 2010 through a marriage to a man who already lived in the country. Over the next two years she gave birth to her two children, but the marriage was crumbling and she decided to leave while still on maternity leave with her second child. Initially, she stayed with her cousin where she was asked to pay 2,500 SEK per month in rent. Her only income was basic maternity pay and child benefit. After rent, she was left with 5,100 SEK. Although what she had left after paying rent was lower than the national norm for social assistance, she could not get any support. She had no contract with her cousin, which meant that she was unable to prove her expenditure. The lack of written agreements when paying rent to live as a lodger, with family, friends or strangers, was a common experience among the informants. Not having a contract meant that the tenant was unable to apply for housing allowance. It also meant that she was unable to prove her housing expenditure to social services. Asma was in theory also eligible for maintenance support, but only learnt about this several years later when she eventually received advocacy support through a charity. When her maternity leave was due to end, Asma turned to social services again:

I got in touch with the municipality again because I had no income. I told them that I needed to enrol on a course or do a work experience or something like that. They said I had to call over the phone. When I did a woman said she would call me back before 5 o'clock. I was waiting by the phone and she called me back at 4:30 and she said, 'You have money left from the National Insurance Agency. She said I had 2,700 left. I told her that I live in a room and that the rent is 2,500, but she said, 'No, you will have to live on this money for a few more weeks'.

The design of social assistance as a form of emergency aid means that applicants like Asma often are told to come back when their resources are completely depleted. When Asma reapplied a few weeks later, she was told she had to go to the Public Employment Service and register as a job seeker, as she had to be available to the labour market in order to be eligible for assistance. In the meantime, she failed to pay her cousin rent and was asked to leave. For two months she stayed with a friend for free and her only income was child benefit. Then she started an employability

course and began to receive Activity Grant (roughly 5,000 SEK per month) through the National Insurance Agency. During the following year, she and her children moved between different lodgings, paying for rooms, but with no contract. At one point she was renting a room from an older woman from the same country of origin as herself. She described this period as follows:

I was like her maid...care worker...and I paid 2,800 to this woman. We lived there for four months. It was really difficult. I couldn't buy any clothes. I was buying second hand clothes for my children. When I got money from the National Insurance Agency I had to pay for my glasses. My glasses were 2,000 and then I paid the nursery 550 because they were there full-time. I couldn't buy a travel card. So I was walking from...to... [mentions two places that it takes about 45 minutes. to 1 hour to walk between] for my Swedish classes in the morning and then I was doing work experience in the afternoon. I was walking there as well. My life was very difficult at this time...

When Asma yet again turned to social services for support, she was encouraged to apply for a student loan and grant through The Swedish Board of Student Finance to complete a childcare course which would bring her closer to the labour market. She started the course, but continued to have housing troubles. After moving with the children between temporary abodes for several years she fell into a serious depression and was unable to pursue her studies. At the time, they lived as lodgers with another family and Asma explains:

We lived there for two months, but I couldn't cope. I became really ill. I felt like giving up. I couldn't cope anymore. I called my children's father and said, 'You have to take your children. I have no housing and I can't cope anymore'. Then I called my friend who has four children and I said 'I have no income, I lost my student loan.'

Asma went to stay with her friend and her ex-husband took the children, but was living in a flat shared with other men. After one month he got a new job where he was starting to work at 6 o'clock in the morning and told Asma he could not keep the children anymore as there was no childcare that early. The children returned in her care, but she was too ill to take them to nursery. Eventually, through an online forum, Asma managed to get in touch with a charity that helped her to re-apply for

support through social services. When we met she was living in an apartment hotel with the support from social services and was actively looking for work. She said:

It is really difficult, you know. I think it is about Sweden's rules, but I would like to finish my employment course, childcare. But unfortunately I'm not allowed to study.

Asma had been told that the condition for her to receive social assistance and temporary housing support was that she would be available to the labour market. However, she felt that she would stand a better chance if she was allowed to finish her qualification. Asma's experiences illustrate the severe financial and practical difficulties that can arise for marginalized and disadvantaged single mothers in Sweden. While transitioning from one benefit to another she was left destitute, not once, but repeatedly. Meanwhile, she had to rely on the altruism of family and friends. Asma's difficulties also illustrate the weakness of Sweden's income protection for single parents who have not qualified for first-line wage replacement benefits (Jaehrling, Kalina & Mesaros 2015). Several of the informants described situations where they had been on the verge of having nothing, like Asma when she only had 2,700 left and had to pay the rent of 2,500, but were told to come back when they had depleted all their resources. The issue of access and gatekeeping in social services will be discussed more in detail in chapter seven. The important point here though is that, generally in Sweden, it is not the need for emergency housing that is the key determinant, but rather the financial resources of the person seeking help. Having no resources left and nowhere to live was a combination of hardships which further exacerbated already difficult situations.

## **From welfare to work?**

Despite the focus on employment as the main route out of poverty in Sweden, there has been little or no debate about the issue of in-work poverty and how this might relate to a restructured labour market (Nelson & Fritzell 2019). Nor has there been much discussion regarding transitions from welfare to work. While social assistance previously served as an important top up in income also for mothers who were employed in Sweden, the threshold for qualifying for such support has been substantially lowered since the 1990s. Previous research in Sweden has showed how assessments have become less generous over time, at the same time as social workers to a

lesser degree make use of their discretionary powers as a tool to look at the overall circumstances of the family (Swärd 2018b). The minimum guidance levels introduced at the end of the 1990s, in order to make case handling less arbitrary have to a large extent become the norm, rather than being used as guidance they are used as a means for municipalities to keep their expenditures as low as possible (Bergmark 2016). This development has been parallel to the changes to the labour market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which have meant that more single mothers are forced into involuntary part-time employment and zero-hour contracts (Jaehrling, Kalina & Mesaros 2015). During the same period, access to public and affordable housing has become more difficult. What impact does this have on the financial stability of single mothers with precarious incomes?

As I will discuss more in detail in later chapters, temporary housing that is accessed through support from social services in greater Stockholm is sometimes very expensive, and it is often social services that end up paying part, or all, of it. In reality, however, this is not only expensive ‘solutions’ for the municipality, but also risks creating an effect where parents that move into employment are locked in poverty. The cost of housing and affordability when in work was something that most mothers raised as a concern and the cost of housing was a constant worry. When Alice exited from a women’s shelter she was moved into a ‘safe flat’ provided by a private company but let through social services. It was a studio flat in one of Stockholm’s most deprived peripheral estates, but the rent was 12,000 per month (a similar flat rented directly from a public housing company in the same area would be 5-6,000 SEK per month). Initially, the rent was paid by social services, but when Alice started a paid work placement in a care home she was expected to cope without any support. However, her income after tax was just 12,000 SEK and on top she only had housing allowance and child benefit which amounted to 4,400 SEK. Alice said to me, ‘We had to live on that...pay all the bills, buy food and everything. We couldn’t live on it, it was so difficult’. When Alice decided to study and work to improve her future job prospects, she was also told by social services that she had to leave the flat as she would no longer be eligible for housing support. She said:

First they helped me a lot, when I had just separated, but then...It could be a bit different. You know, if social services are supposed to help people, everybody is different and has different situations. I wanted to take care of myself and do something. But when they have such hard requirements, that as soon as I study, I can get no support at all!

Despite the difficulties she knew she would encounter, Alice decided to move out and start her course while also working part-time. She moved into a room with her child in a two-bedroom flat that she was sharing with a couple. For several years, Alice moved around between different lodgings, where just like Asma, she could never get the landlords to sign contracts. She paid between 3,000 and 4,000 SEK for a room, but was unable to apply for housing allowance. As a student she had a loan, a grant and also worked extra as a care assistant. Alice explained that working as a care worker on a zero-hour contract she could earn anywhere between 5,000 and 15,000 SEK per month before tax. The summer holidays were the best period to work as this was when she could earn the most, but this meant that her child had to be in childcare throughout the summer holidays. Another difficulty raised by Alice and several other mothers was that landlords asked for deposits, which either meant that they would have no money left for other expenses or that they had to borrow. Alice explained:

In order to find something I have to wait until I get paid on the 25<sup>th</sup>. When you move they want a deposit and the rent. If the rent is 4,000 and I'm moving in I have to pay 8,000. If you are renting a sublet it is usually double. Once a woman called me. The rent was 11,000 and I had to pay 22,000. But how can I save? I always need to have some money. That's just the way it is. Like now, I don't know where we are going to move, but we have to leave at the end of the month.

Although Alice made many strategic choices with the intention of 'getting out' of poverty and improving her and her child's life chances, she felt as if she was 'punished by the system'. If she had not started to work or study, she would have had the rent paid and could have remained in the flat. However, she wanted to improve her job prospects and therefore had to leave. The following year, she was asked by The National Insurance Agency to pay back some of the housing benefit she had received while in the 'safe flat', as she had earned more money than anticipated at the beginning of the year. Currently the problems with overpayments and debts associated with housing benefit in Sweden are addressed in a public inquiry.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, the Swedish National Audit Office raised concerns that housing benefit debts can cause significant problems for low-income families (Riksrevisionen 2018). To my

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<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/kommittedirektiv/2018/09/dir.-201897/>

knowledge, at least five of my informants were struggling with repayments of debts due to overpayments of housing benefits. The lack of support at critical points, is an issue often highlighted in international research looking into transitions between welfare, education and work among single mothers, and interventions are described as limited, punitive or short sighted (Caragata & Alcalde 2014).

## **Work orientation and expectations**

Foreign-born women have a lower level of labour-market participation than women born in Sweden and are therefore a target for special interventions in labour-market policy. In the spring of 2019, the Swedish government announced that extra resources would be allocated to ensure that more foreign-born women entered the labour market. The Swedish Finance Minister Magdalena Andersson proclaimed that:

Everybody who can work should work. Today, the employment rate among foreign-born women is high from a comparative European perspective, but too low for Swedish standards. Knowledge of the Swedish language is the key to the labour market and becoming a part of Swedish society (Regeringskansliet 2018).

Targeted interventions directed at foreign-born women are not new in Sweden, but are often more focused on the individual and ignore many of the issues raised by feminist economists and welfare scholars. In a review of labour-market support directed towards this group, the Swedish Women's Lobby (Sveriges Kvinnolobby 2017) has pointed out that resources are skewed towards men and that not enough attention is given to women's caring responsibilities. Despite similar educational backgrounds, men are more likely to move into employment quicker than women. To my knowledge, no official reports or government proposals mention the intersection of having a foreign background with single motherhood as significant. As a result, there appears to be very little recognition of some of the specific challenges or barriers on the labour market which can be attributed to sole caring responsibilities in combination with other factors. Previous research has also showed that stereotypes and preconceived ideas about women from different ethnic backgrounds can play a role in how street-level bureaucrats assess their capabilities, and how they offer access to different employment or education programmes (Hedblom 2004). This was an issue that was brought up by Kerstin and Emma who worked in adult education. Kerstin pointed out that there were more work-related courses that targeted men and that many women, especially those with shorter educational backgrounds

and who struggled to learn the language, were not seen as ‘fitting in’ with the criteria on the Swedish labour market. However, they both maintained that their students expressed a desire to work, mainly in the care sector although they had barriers which made it difficult.

The Swedish welfare structure and labour-market policies also seemed to have influenced the women in this study. Seven out of the seventeen mothers were already working when I met with them, and others, like Gloria, had a long work history in the service sector which she was hoping to return to in the future. Darya and Alice worked as care workers on a part-time or hourly basis. Nora, Judith and Mounia were cleaning, Nora on a full-time basis, while the other two had zero-hour contracts. Helen worked on an hourly basis with both care and cleaning. Ayomi had a work placement in an office through the jobcentre, but it would soon come to an end. She had previously also worked in childcare, but lost her job after separating from her husband. None of these mothers had permanent jobs and they were constantly worried about losing their work and having to start all over again. The most commonly cited worry that might cause this to happen was their insecure housing arrangements. Helen was moving around in temporary sublets with two to three months intervals with two teenage children. Her first job started at 5 am in the morning, and she was therefore always dependent on the availability of public transport at this time. Once in the past, in a housing emergency, social services had supported the family with temporary accommodation in a hostel, but Helen had been unable to get to work because the bus was not running during the night. Helen’s teenage daughter was also working alongside her studies to help with the family’s income.

All of the mothers I spoke to, regardless of ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds, expressed a desire to work and become self-sufficient. A primary motivation was to be freed from requirements and meetings with social services, but they saw a value in work – both for themselves and for their children. A majority said they would be willing to do any job as long as it would give them enough income. Sophia had never worked in Sweden, but this, she felt, was more due to the problems she had with housing than her willingness to work:

I get social assistance, but the only thing I need is somewhere to live. Then I could work. I can do anything, also cleaning. It is also good for the children, for our own dignity... I just need a flat and then I could take care of myself.

Yasmin also said that if it wasn't for her immediate housing problems she would like to work:

I want to work. I have a profession. I would like to do some further training within my profession so that I can develop my skills further. I want to work. But right now, I feel no hope for the future... the circumstances don't allow it. I have too many problems. I just think about today. How am I dealing with today. Tomorrow I think about tomorrow. I just think one day at a time.

In her country of origin Yasmin had been a hairdresser, and although she wanted to continue in this field she started a course in adult social care. Similar views were expressed by Sara, who was exempted from looking for work due to ill-health and literacy barriers. Although she was aware of her limits, she expressed a desire to work. She mentioned cleaning and care work as potential jobs she could do in the future.

Several of the women were already actively looking for work, but had so far not been successful in their efforts. When I asked Asma what kind of job she would like to do, she answered:

I just want a job! Any job. Cleaning, care work, child care, nursing assistant...I just need a job. It doesn't matter what it is. Just a job.

Asma thought that if she could just get a job, it would be easier to find somewhere to live. However, without being able to finish her childcare course she thought it might be difficult. Women with university degrees also said that they were looking for all sorts of jobs. Leila had a degree from another European country, but her only previous working experience was as a shop assistant. She had given birth to three children and had not worked for five years:

You know it is, when you have such a large gap in your CV, it can be difficult. So I have to start at a lower level. My expectations can't be that high. They [The Public Employment Service] have given me some support. They have even told me I could apply for a job at the Public Employment Service...those kinds of jobs...the requirements are not so high. Yeah those kinds of jobs. Why not you know?

Many of the women felt that they had lost time because they had encountered so many set-backs since arriving in Sweden. Amal had a degree in English language and literature from her country of origin. However, after six years as undocumented

in Sweden, her main priority once she had been regularised was just to get a job. She had studied to become a childcare assistant and was looking for work:

I have contacted several nurseries about work and I'm just waiting for my police check now. I have sent my CV to the head teacher and I will meet with her after I have the police check. I hope I will be able to work with her.

Darya, who at the age of 25 was the youngest mother in my study, expressed the need for holistic support for young mothers so that they could find sustainable employment:

I think it is really important for young mothers...you know, they are young and need a good education that can lead to a job. It is important to be independent and not economically dependent. It is really important to get support with the children so you can study. I think this is really important.

When I met Darya, she had recently started to work on a part-time basis with a zero-hour contract as a care assistant and was no longer in receipt of social assistance. She described the job as follows:

It's not so difficult. Mostly I go to the customers houses and prepare food, a meal, and then go for a walk if they need help with that. Then I was taught how to distribute medication and help with personal hygiene. But the most important thing was that you should be able to drive because they live far out on this island.

Darya was working in an area in the Stockholm archipelago where elderly people sometimes lived on their own in remote areas difficult to access with public transport and therefore it was important to have a driver's license. She told me that initially it was her children who had motivated her to learn how to drive:

The children saw that the other children have bigger houses, they have cars and their parents drive them to the football practice. I used to go with them as well and we were travelling here and there with public transport. My son said to me, 'Mum why don't you get a driver's license? Then you can have a car and work and we don't have to walk when it is raining and snowing'. So I started to study. I borrowed a book at the library. I booked a theory test and I passed at the first trial.

A friend helped her to learn to drive in his car and her former support worker helped her to get a loan to pay the remaining costs. It was the driver's licence that enabled her to get work. However, she was still struggling financially and had to leave her children aged nine and eleven on their own in the evenings when she went to work, which she found difficult. Darya would like to study, but was not sure that she would be able to without additional support from social services. As a young mother she had previously had a support worker through social services, but as she had turned 25 this was no longer available. Instead, she had applied for a contact family that her children could go and spend time with as an extra family, but her application had been rejected. She was not sure on what grounds.

## **Debts and repayments**

Several of the mothers talked about their financial situation as a 'trap' that they were unable to get out of. Gloria was one of the mothers that I met with on numerous occasions for almost two years. During this time she moved several times between hostels and sublets. The conversation relayed here underneath took place during her second spell of acute homelessness during this time. In between she had lived in a sublet studio flat, which she had been told she could live in indeterminately, but from which she was asked to leave just four months after moving in because the landlord wanted it back for a family member to live in. The following conversation around money took place in a studio flat that social services were renting in a private apartment hotel. At the time, Gloria was on maternity leave with her second child and was in receipt of maternity benefit. Mothers on maternity benefit who were placed in temporary accommodation had to pay some of this cost by themselves.

Tove: And how much do you pay here?

Gloria: I think it is 25,000, no 27,000, something like that.

Tove: They pay 27,000 and you pay how much?

Gloria: I pay 12,000.

Tove: Here?

Gloria: Yes, but I have sent the money to social services.

Tove: But when you lived in [name of place] you only had to pay 3000 something?

Gloria: Yes, but now I got money from The Insurance Agency. It was parental leave pay...or actually it was sick pay...for 3-4 months backdated. They sent me 36,000 SEK and I was told I have to give them the money.

Tove: All of it?

Gloria: Yes, all of it. The paper is there [points at a paper on the kitchen table]. They have given me an account number and I have had to put the money there. First I sent them 22,000 and then they said I had to pay the hotel 12,000, otherwise they would not continue to help paying the hotel. I have only paid once the rest of it they pay. Normally they have paid, it was only when I got this money.

Tove: I remember last time I saw you, you were talking about the possibility of paying the Debt Enforcement Agency.

Gloria: Yes, but they said no. I told them that I have debts and it makes it difficult to find a flat when you have a bad credit record. So if I could pay the 36,000 to the Debt Enforcement Agency and then in that way...as then the debt will be almost nothing I can start paying it off and it will be easier to find a flat. They said no.

Tove: What reason did they give?

Gloria: They said they don't pay for people. I said, but it is my money. They said no, because they pay for the hotel so they should have the money.

Tove: How did you feel about that?

Gloria: I felt that it wasn't good because if they had let me pay...because the rest is not much...I can pay it by myself bit by bit. If I improve my credit score it would be much easier for me to find a flat even in Stockholm. They have not given me the chance to pay.

Tove: Do you think the rules are too strict?

Gloria: Not maybe too strict, but there are other things they need to consider. If you pay for people and it is expensive you need to let people have the opportunity to find their own place, as you don't want to pay.

Without the support from social services, Gloria would have had nowhere to live. However, receiving financial support from social services meant that any additional money coming in had to be handed over or deducted from future payments. This is one of the conditions for upholding social assistance in Sweden. Gloria further explained that at her initial meeting she had signed a paper stating that she agreed for social services to obtain information from the National Insurance Agency and the Tax Agency. Other papers that needed to be handed in on a monthly basis were bank statements and receipts. Gloria felt that the main concern of her social worker was money, rather than practical support, something she described as undermining and not helpful.

Gloria had understood that any back-dated payments from the National Insurance Agency had to be paid to social services. Other women had found the rules more difficult to comprehend. Hanna had a similar back-dated payment from the National Insurance Agency for child benefit and maintenance allowance for the sum of 20,000 SEK. She used the money to buy a laptop and some things for her children from a private person. Hanna told me that she bought the laptop to be able to look for housing and work. Hanna also paid a private debt she had accrued before she started to receive maternity pay. A few weeks later, Hanna ended up in a situation where she had to turn to social services for emergency assistance with housing. However, when they saw that she had used the money for other things than shelter she was accused of having made 'the wrong priorities'. In journal notes that Hanna showed me, it said that 'the mother had put the children in emergency need due to having made the wrong decisions, choices and priorities'. Social services demanded that she should contact the person she had bought the goods from and ask him to return the money. He refused and in the end Hanna and her children were still placed in temporary emergency accommodation paid for by social services until her next maternity benefit payment from The National Insurance Agency.

At my last meeting with Ayomi, she had started a paid work experience, in an office, through the Public Employment Service, she was no longer receiving social assistance through social services, but continued to have economic difficulties. Her main sources of worry were that she had a very high rent to pay for the sublet that she was living in, but also that she had become liable for repayments of housing benefit and maintenance allowance to the National Insurance Agency. 'I didn't know that I had to give all this information to the National Insurance Agency', Ayomi told me. She continued to say:

Who tells you? Social services told me I should have shared custody with the father, but they never told me it meant that I had to call or send papers to the National Insurance Agency. It means they paid me too much. Now after I have to pay them back. Now, after, I have a big problem because I owe them 14,000 or something, I can't remember exactly how much.

Ayomi told me they had already started to deduct 400 SEK per month from her maintenance payments and that soon they would also start deducting 1,000 SEK from the housing benefit. After deductions and tax she would be left with 14,000 SEK to live on but had a rent of 11,500 to pay. On several occasions, Ayomi had

had to ask her older son who was studying at university, and her mother who lived abroad, to help her financially.

Another issue that came up in several interviews, and which was both seen as a financial strain and hard mentally was that with every move made, the families lost things. Furniture, clothes and personal belongings were left in different places. Sometimes they had to be thrown away. Nora explained:

I told them [social services] that if I get some help and find a place then I can save my things, but they said, 'No'. We cannot do anything. You have to throw it away!' In one year I have thrown away things for maybe 20,000 SEK. Every time I move I have to buy new things and then leave them, I buy new and I throw away...

Ayomi and Yasmin were helped temporarily with storage, but when social services stopped paying after three months they lost their things. In a few cases, social services had paid for basic furniture several times over a number of years. Some mothers told me they had got into debt because they had to buy new things. At one point, Asma was told she could rent a small flat for two years while the tenant was abroad. She says:

She said she would travel to her home country and stay there for two years. You can live here, you and the children and pay 5,000 per month. I said, 'Ok'. I was happy. I borrowed money from the bank to buy two beds for the children. Well I bought them on credit, with interest it becomes almost 10,000. After three months she came back and she said you have to move now. I was so sad, but what can you do? I bought them and I'm still paying. Every month I pay 300 SEK.

None of the mothers in this study had large debts, but their situation of 'permanent scarcity' meant that even smaller sums like the one mentioned by Asma above were burdensome (Hjort & Salonen 2000). Whatever the main source of income was at a given time, these families continued to live under economic duress on an ongoing basis with little hope of any lasting major change. Many had both 'official' debts that had been passed on to the National Debt Agency, and 'unofficial' debts to family and friends which resulted in strained relationships when they were unable to pay back. Those debts were often to people who had housed them temporarily and they were a common trigger for being asked to move. They could also result in abusive

behaviour, where, as described by Asma, one of her relatives refused to give her letters that arrived at their address if she did not pay them 500 SEK every month.

## **The role of education**

The group of mothers that participated in this study had very different educational backgrounds, which is also reflective of the overall migrant female population in Sweden (Sveriges Kvinnolobby 2017). Nine women had received secondary school education in their countries of origin. Two of these women had also done further education in administration. Two women had married as teenagers and had only received basic education. One of these women struggled with literacy, while the other had received private tuition from a former teacher after becoming a mother at the age of fourteen. Two women had attended university but not finished before leaving for Sweden, while one woman had a degree in education from her country of origin. Both Leila and Sama, who came to Sweden as children, had university degrees. They had completed their degrees before having children, but had struggled to establish themselves on the labour market because of their difficult life situations. Both had worked in the past, and when I met with them they were both actively looking for work again.

Among the women who had migrated as adults, it was common to have attended adult education courses in Sweden. Most had attended Swedish classes, but also courses in adult social care and child care. None of them had engaged in higher education after becoming single mothers and experiencing housing insecurity. Several of the mothers said that their learning and ability to focus had suffered due to the multiple stresses in their lives which were perpetuated by their housing troubles. This also had a negative impact on how they viewed their and their children's future. Sophia struggled with learning Swedish and had to interrupt a work placement in the service sector due to a housing crisis. Although she had a secondary school diploma from her country of origin and some limited work experience, she had never worked in Sweden.

They have crushed my hopes and dreams. It feels like I have nothing left in my head, I can't think, I can't even learn Swedish anymore. But I think I could maybe work with children or maybe in a restaurant. I can't really study anymore, it is too hard. What I learn doesn't stay. My Swedish was better before, but it is like my brain has given up. I was young when I came here, I was only 24. My plan was to learn the language and then I wanted to work as an interpreter or a teacher. But as soon as I arrived in Sweden I started having problem after problem.

'They' referred to by Sophia were social services as she felt that her housing problem had created additional problems for her and the children. It had prevented her from working, and affected her learning, her mental health and the children's well-being. Hanna expressed a similar view when she said that living in a hostel and having to move around all the time had an impact on both her ability to learn and her thoughts about the future:

Of course my learning is affected by all my daily problems. I had plans... You know I was almost finished with Swedish level D, but now I have been put back to Swedish level C. I wanted to study and become a pharmacist but now I have lost hope. I can't see any future. I want to, but I'm so tired. The tiredness is in the way. It's important to know the language well, but I feel stuck. I had plans, but I don't know how I can achieve them now.

All of the mothers did, however, despite the difficulties continue to attend courses and look for work. Yasmin finished her Swedish course and started a course in adult social care with the goal of becoming a nursing assistance. During one period of an acute housing emergency where she and her children were staying with a family member in a studio apartment in another part of Stockholm, she continued to attend a work placement in a care home that started at 7 am in the morning. Alice had completed a nursing assistant course, and Asma had finished the highest level of Swedish and started a childcare course before she could no longer cope. Asma had, like a majority of the mothers attended different work experience placements. In Asma's case it was in a cleaning company, but it did not result in work. Other work placements mentioned by the informants had been in companies in the service sector, cleaning and care work. Some of the placements were interrupted because of housing emergencies.

The mothers who were in receipt of social assistance, and not on maternity or sick-leave, were mandated to engage in education or had to actively look for work full-time. Hanna attended Swedish classes and an employment course. She started at 8:30 am in the morning and finished at 4:30 pm. Her main concern was not that she had to study full-time, but rather the difficulties associated with the combined efforts of moving between temporary housing, lone parenting of two children under the age of five and studying full-time. Like a majority of mothers, she kept her children in the same nursery and attended the same adult education centre regardless of where in greater Stockholm she was staying temporarily. When I asked her about the impact on her studies she said:

They [the teachers] are aware of my problems. I have informed them. Sometimes they give me compliments because I'm still learning despite all my problems. But they know... In the afternoon I finish at half past four and then I go to the nursery. It can take time to get the kids ready and then I'm not back at the hostel until half past six at the earliest. If I go straight back it takes one and a half hour, but I also need to shop and do other things. Then when I get in I have to cook, wash the children...and that means they go to bed late. They are not in bed until nine or ten and then they are tired in the morning. We have to get up at six at the latest to be on time. We are so tired all the time.

The requirements put on a mother in receipt of social assistance were decided on an individual basis, which meant that some had to attend a course full time and another one only part-time. Yasmin, who initially only had to attend four hours per day when she came off maternity benefits, complained that she did not think her social worker took into account how difficult it was to manage all these requirements when she had nowhere permanent to live:

At one point they said I had to go to school in the afternoon as well, but I said, 'I'm already doing four hours'. I said, 'I have three children and they need to be looked after. I need to cook and wash...how will I have time for everything? I take the children to nursery and I pick them up. It doesn't work. First you have dumped me...you are not helping with housing or anything. I'm homeless, it's too much for me'. Then she said, 'This thing that you are homeless is not my concern. You need to attend an afternoon course – at least for a few weeks'. She was insisting and finally I agreed. Then one of my children fell ill. I called and said my son is ill and I might have to be home all week. Then she said, 'Okay, then you don't need to go, but you will have to in the future. I will inform you when it starts'.

The disregard for the difficulties suffered by single mothers who were homeless was also an issue raised by the adult education teachers, who said that they would receive emails from social services questioning why a person was not making progress. However, from their point of view as teachers, they looked at it differently, as expressed by Emma:

You know, it is often the case that they regress or at least are not making any progress. They are physically in the classroom but their thoughts are somewhere else. They can't take in the learning. So during the period when they are homeless, you

cannot count it... Well they have been registered at the course but they haven't attended it mentally, if you see what I mean. Their learning is put on hold.

Kerstin agreed and said that the key function of their classes during this period was that they offered a sense of normality and routines in life. Emma told me about one student who had to get up at 5 am every morning to get her children to school and then be in the classroom for 8:30 because her temporary accommodation was so far away. She added:

I think it is incredible that they get here and that they are on time and willing to learn, considering their housing situation and how their private situations are. Add to this what they have experienced on their journeys here... They are quite amazing. That they don't just give up...

A few mothers had stopped attending adult education classes when they gained employment. This was the case of both Helen and Judith. Their Swedish was limited, but good enough for their jobs in cleaning. Helen was also working as a personal assistant to an elderly person from the same county of origin as herself. Two women, Amal and Darya, who had been barred from attending adult education before having their status in Sweden legalised, had learnt Swedish through their own efforts. They had actively sought out Swedish-speaking friends, visited the library and tried to immerse themselves in the language as much as possible. When they later applied to attend Swedish classes they were told that their level was too high for ordinary classes. Instead they were encouraged to attend employment-related courses.

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have presented the mothers' experiences of income vulnerability, their employment prospects, and their experiences of formal as well as informal education and language learning. These are resources that are negotiated within relationships of power and subordination. Access to income, employment and education was not only determined by individual desires, choices and ability, but also prevailing social and institutional arrangements. Homelessness and housing exclusion were seen as perpetuating their financial vulnerability. The mothers transited between different sources of primary income, which includes social-security based payments on a basic rates, income through employment, social assistance and student loans. Em-

ployment opportunities accessed by these women were often poorly paid, part-time and on zero-hour contracts. They struggled to gain access to income-based social security schemes and wage replacement schemes in the event of unemployment. Transitions between different forms of income made them particularly vulnerable to severe income deprivation and debt. Income protection schemes were not sufficient to safeguard them and their children from destitution. The lived experiences shared by these mothers challenge the image of 'passive welfare subjects' and also put into question the single focus on employment as the route out of poverty without also addressing the need for adequate income protection schemes. The educational backgrounds of the informants were heterogeneous, but this did not seem to have any major impact on employment options and expectations. Work in the female dominated care and service sectors was what a majority of the women aspired to and saw as a chance of gaining independence. All of the women expressed a desire to work and free themselves from dependency on social services. However, their difficult housing situations were described as being 'in the way'.

The question of access, 'in turn, opens up questions of economic, political and social structural context and the wider distribution of resources of various kinds' (Lister, 2004, p. 132). Although the mothers in this study were clearly exercising agency and making active decisions, they were sometimes feeling so constrained, or 'done to', that at times feelings of disempowerment and hopelessness took over. During these periods, coping on a day-by-day basis pushed them into 'survival mode' and made strategic thinking more difficult (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). These constraints were most strongly articulated when the mothers spoke about how they felt about their interactions with representatives from social services – in particular in moments where they experienced a housing crisis. The difficulties experienced by the mothers discussed in this chapter are reflective of earlier research that has highlighted the specific vulnerability of single-parent families in Sweden (Alm, Nelson & Nieuwenhuis 2019). It also reflects the structural changes to female-dominated jobs in the service and care sectors with part-time employment and zero-hour contracts. Reports from trade unions have also highlighted that foreign-born women are more likely to be employed on an hourly basis than those born in Sweden (Wondmeneh 2013). Sweden transitioned to becoming a dual-earner country at an earlier stage than many other Western countries, but its subsequent restructuring of social security benefits seems to have increased the risk of poverty among single households, with or without children (Alm, Nelson & Nieuwenhuis 2019).

# HOUSING EXCLUSION

This chapter will introduce the barriers facing low-income single mothers in accessing the housing market in metropolitan Stockholm. As regular housing options for low-income families have diminished, new unregulated options on a ‘parallel market’ are surfacing. This market is characterised by high costs, insecurity, transient arrangements and a lack of legal rights and entitlements. It exists in a space which opens up for both altruism and exploitation. Despite Sweden’s commitment, through a range of national and international documents and treaties, to ensure that all its citizens have access to adequate housing, it is the inaction, or lack of assurance, in this area that is most noticeable. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, income is a means to an end and insecurity in income also has an impact on a single mother’s ability to secure housing. The importance for female emancipation of the development of housing policies aimed at ensuring that all Swedish citizens had access to decent and affordable housing in post-war Sweden, is an aspect of the welfare state which has received little attention. The lack of intersectional analysis is also symptomatic of many studies that focus on the impact of the ‘roll back’ from a social housing policy which coincided with the fiscal crisis in the early 1990s. What has been the impact on women, and in particular single mothers? How does gender intersect with ethnicity and class?

I will begin this chapter by describing the barriers facing low-income single mothers on the housing market in the greater Stockholm area. Researchers that look at informal housing markets have highlighted that the context of the local regular housing market needs to be taken into consideration as well (Burgers 1998). The inaccessibility of housing on the regular rental market, thus needs to be seen as inter-related with, and as a driver of, the ‘parallel’ markets that I discuss in this chapter. Although family homelessness and housing exclusion are on the rise across Europe,

the Swedish housing system and policies have led to a specific set of circumstances which act to exclude marginalized groups from affordable and secure housing options. Instead, vulnerable families, like the ones involved in this research, are pushed out on the unregulated ‘parallel’ market. In the second part of this chapter, drawing on the experiences shared by the informants, I will outline some of the key characteristics of this alternative market and the risks it poses to vulnerable women and children. For analytical purposes, I have divided this into sections focusing on the internet-based marketplace and the one facilitated through social or ethnic networks. I will also discuss the limits of altruism among family and friends and how a few of my informants eventually found a place that they could call a home.

## **A brief background**

Contemporary Swedish housing policy is based on the principle that all citizens should be equal enough to have the opportunity to manage to rent or buy property on the same housing market (Boverket 2014). Individuals are expected to solve their own housing needs on the housing market and there is no established social housing sector where low-income families are prioritized, as is the case in many other European countries. Instead, historically, families unable to buy a property were housed through a large affordable public sector managed through municipal housing companies. From the 1930s and into the 1990s, public housing in Sweden was a key component of the country’s ambition to construct a housing system that would secure high-quality, affordable housing for all (see e.g. Björkman 2012; Grander 2018; Listerborn 2018). However, the past thirty years have seen politically initiated changes that have altered the function of the public housing market in greater Stockholm and beyond. The national housing policy has more or less disappeared and has left municipalities to decide locally what the public housing sector will look like. Inspired by the British right-to-buy scheme introduced in the 1980s, through a formal decision in 1992 the Swedish Liberal-Conservative government allowed for municipalities to convert public rental housing into different market forms. In some municipalities in and around metropolitan Stockholm this meant that all, or at least substantial parts of, the public housing stock was sold off to private housing companies or through conversions into market-based tenancy-owned cooperatives.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Tenant ownership co-operatives in Sweden were originally a response to extreme housing shortages and severe housing speculation. In 1923, tenant organisations founded HSB Riksförbund to promote and make the necessary representations to political bodies in support of co-op housing development. The original goals of the tenant organisation activists were to give

The human geographer Brett Christophers (2013) has referred to the contemporary Swedish housing system as a ‘monstrous hybridity’. He argues that it is essentially the housing market’s mixed political-economic character that helps to explain why the current Swedish housing system is out of sync in a way that is detrimental to the country’s most socio-economically vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, the absence of institutional coordination at a regional level has meant that each municipality has pursued their own housing agendas, which in most cases has been about keeping and attracting the middle class, resulting in an underinvestment in affordable rental housing (Andersson & Magnusson Turner 2014). Following changes to the legislation that regulates the public housing sector in 2011, the expectation was that also public housing companies should be managed like private companies at the same time as they have a social responsibility. According to the Swedish housing scholar Martin Grander (2018), this has made the role and responsibility of the public housing sector less clear. One consequence, which is noticeable in the Stockholm region, is that public housing companies interpret the law in different ways. In some municipalities, public housing companies are now applying the same income rules as private corporations and in effect shut families with lower incomes out completely. For example, sometimes the landlord only accepts four people (including children) in a two-bedroom flat and an income that is three or four times higher than the rent. Housing benefit, child benefit and child maintenance rarely count as an income, which again puts single parents further at a disadvantage. In addition, a majority of private housing companies and some public housing companies do not accept people with debts or social assistance (Boverket 2017).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, whilst there are flats specifically reserved for students in higher education, young adults under the age of 30 and senior citizens, there are no special options available to families with children. Instead, their opportunities tend to be even more limited due to rules regarding the maximum number of people allowed to live in a flat and the rules regarding income in proportion to monthly rent. According to the NBHBP, the rules regarding how many people are allowed to live in a flat are more common in and around Sweden’s metropolitan areas. Furthermore, private landlords that have

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everyone a way to control their housing situation as well as providing good housing to large groups in society. A majority of privately owned flats in Sweden are owned under this tenure, which restricts the owner’s ability to sublet, for example. For an overview of the role and history of co-operative housing in Sweden and Norway, see Sørvoll & Bengtsson (2018).

<sup>29</sup> In the city of Stockholm, the three public housing companies accept lower incomes and social assistance. In 2019, a single adult should have at least 4,923 SEK left after having paid the rent. These housing companies also look at case by case through an individual assessment where additional benefits might be included ([bostad.stockholm.se](http://bostad.stockholm.se)). Nevertheless, as the public housing stock has shrunk, the flats available to those with limited incomes are very hard to come by.

their own housing queues or allocation systems are allowed to put down their own rules and requirements. There is, however, no legislation that prohibits landlords from applying even stricter conditions (Boverket 2017). Discriminatory practices based on income and number of household members are thus legal and creates particular problems for single-earner households with children.

During the 21st century, low-income families have found it increasingly difficult to establish themselves on the housing market, especially in the larger cities. The growing income inequality in Sweden has also had an impact on the households' ability to access and afford housing. While a majority of Swedish households have seen an increase in their disposable incomes, for some groups the disposable income has decreased. According to the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning (Boverket 2016), the groups that are particularly vulnerable are:

- Families with children, in particular those headed by a single parent or who have many children.
- Households that are renting their home
- Households that live in urban areas (notably Sweden's three main urban regions – Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö).

Among those groups there is a growing number who are struggling to meet the basic consumption needs of the family. The NBHBP also points out that households that are renting on the sublet market have the least margins followed by households on the regular rental market. On average those that live in a sublet spend 40 per cent of their disposable income on rent and those that rent on the regular market 36 per cent. Furthermore, women with low incomes spend more on housing than men with low incomes (Boverket 2016).

The general shortage in the supply of housing has sparked a discussion about the need for an acceleration of housing construction. However, the high cost of newly produced housing units in Sweden has more recently also led to an increased focus on the needs of different groups that might be excluded, notably young people, newly arrived refugees and to some extent the elderly due to the issue of affordability. In recent years, this has given rise to debates regarding the introductions of new forms of social housing in Sweden, where different interest groups and political parties have argued for or against the introduction of 'social housing'. However, as pointed out by the Swedish housing scholar Anna Granath Hansson (2020) these debates have often been built on limited knowledge of the differences between models and systems for social housing solutions in different countries. Furthermore, she argues

that there has been a lack of focus on a Swedish context and what the political goals should look like in this country. This needs to be based on an analysis of the current housing market, priorities with regard to housing needs and public finances. Nevertheless, while these debates are ongoing, alternative ‘solutions’ have appeared on what can be described as an ad-hoc basis – either in the form of ‘parallel’ unregulated markets, like the ones I will discuss in this chapter, or as alternatives that are facilitated by social services, something which I will discuss more at length in chapter eight.

## **Housing inequality in metropolitan Stockholm**

The conversions of rental properties into market-based cooperatives have had a profound impact on the socio-spatial development in metropolitan Stockholm. Between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of residents that lived in public housing in the city of Stockholm was reduced from 32 per cent to 18 per cent. In the central areas of the city, the proportion was more than halved from 19 per cent to only 7 per cent (Anderson & Magnusson Turner 2014). Since the 1990s, residential segregation trends also show increased polarisation in greater Stockholm. This has been geographically manifested in enclaves of poverty or wealth where income levels, ethnicity, and form of housing clearly coincide (see e.g. Wind & Hedman 2018; Grundström & Molina 2016; Andersson & Magnusson Turner 2014). Despite the focus on individual choice and self-sufficiency, it is widely acknowledged that families with low incomes have very little – if any – choice on the housing market in Stockholm. In a report published by the city of Stockholm, and whose title can be translated as *Unequal Stockholm*, the authors point out that ‘as the number of market-based cooperatives have increased in the city through conversions and new builds and rental properties have decreased, the option for low income households to choose neighbourhood has been reduced’ (Bremberg, Slättman & Alarcón 2015, p. 63). As a consequence, they conclude, individuals with different backgrounds are less likely to meet in their everyday lives and there is a risk that prejudice regarding, and stigmatization of, certain areas or groups are reinforced. I would add that it has also increased the risk of ‘poverty blindness’ among citizens that are established on the housing and labour markets, as they might never be exposed to the difficulties encountered by families such as those who have participated in this study.

The areas where families with low incomes and migrant backgrounds are concentrated are situated at the periphery of the city of Stockholm, either within the munic-

ipal border or in neighbouring municipalities that are reached through the expansive underground and commuter train system. It is often large housing estates with a concentration of rental apartment blocks that were constructed during the so-called million program – an affordable housing scheme created between 1965 and 1975. In an attempt to secure housing for its growing population, the City of Stockholm also purchased land and built large-scale housing estates in bordering municipalities. Some of this housing stock is still public, but many blocks of flats have also been sold to private companies or been converted to tenancy-owned cooperatives. All of the housing stock in the bordering municipalities has been sold by Stockholm's public housing companies – either to other public housing companies or to private corporations.

The Million Programme has its name from its ambition to construct one million public housing units across Sweden that would offer adequate housing to the Swedish working class. From the 1950s and onwards, the slums of central Stockholm were cleared and replaced by modern architecture. Young families, old residents from the slum dwellings and newly arrived migrants – from other parts of Sweden and abroad - moved into the peripheral housing estates at the time. In the 1980s in Sweden, the vision of good quality affordable housing for all was virtually met. Today, however, the lack of affordable housing, in combination with cutbacks in social spending and a growing population, have led to an increasing problem of overcrowding, an emerging lodging market and a black market for sublets on many peripheral estates (Thörn & Thörn 2017). The same problems that the Million Programme was once meant to eradicate, have now surfaced within a new disguise.

The situation in Stockholm, and many other places in Sweden, could be described as a sign of 'advanced marginality' – an impact of welfare state retrenchment – where 'territorial fixation and stigmatization' is a consequential outcome (Wacquant 2007). However, the territorial fixation in social policy does not capture the causes and consequences of enforced mobility as experienced by my informants. In their experiences there is no regular pattern or predictability in terms of housing trajectories that can be recorded. Instead, it is the insecurity, transiency, unpredictability, irregularity and fluidity of these arrangements that should be noted. Short stays in different neighbourhoods across large geographical areas are the norm for many families. Camilla, one of the child nurses, described this as follows:

You always know that there are these families that jump around...you can ask anybody that works in an area like this one...they move between...our areas...first they live three months in Rinkeby, then three months in Rågsved, three months in

Tensta, three months in Södertälje... they constantly move around in the whole area of Stockholm.

Camilla continues by saying, 'It is the first thing they talk to us about when they come here. It's the biggest thing for them. There is no point talking about anything else. If you have nowhere to live, it is the biggest problem you have. It's such a basic need'. So how do they go about solving it?

A first requirement for anybody looking for rental housing in metropolitan Stockholm is to sign up in the housing queue with the Stockholm Housing Exchange or other municipal housing queues (where those exist).<sup>30</sup> It is through this system that secure tenancies in both public housing and some private housing owned by housing corporations, are let. However, as recognised in a leaflet that I picked up in a social service district office in the city of Stockholm, 'the waiting time is long, but if you sign up today you will have a chance to get a flat in a few years' (Hässelby-Vällingby SDF 2017). According to statistics from the Housing Exchange itself, the average 'few years' in 2018 were 11.3 years for a regular flat within the old housing stock. The number of years for new-built flats was 8.2 years, but for most low-income families those flats are out of reach as they tend to be very expensive (Hellekant 2019) A new-built two-bedroom flat in a suburb of Stockholm can cost between 11,000 and 13,000 SEK per month. Many landlords require the prospective tenant to earn three or four times the rent per month. To be eligible for a flat that costs 11,000 SEK, the prospective tenant needs to have a household income of at least 396,000 SEK per year. The average yearly income for a full-time care worker in Stockholm is 295,752 SEK per year and for a cleaner 283,584 (Steen 2018). However, as these are sectors where part-time and zero-hour contracts are common, many earn less. Flats are not allocated on the basis of 'need', but rather on the basis of 'deservingness', which is defined through length of years in the queue in combination with other criteria set by the landlord. Every year, the number of years in the queue required to be eligible for a flat increases, which was also noted by the mothers that were waiting. When I asked Nora for how long she had been in the queue, she said:

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<sup>30</sup> The city of Stockholm administers a regional housing exchange that anybody who is over 18 years old and pays 250 SEK per annum can join. However, far from all rental properties in the region are advertised through this route. Some private landlords and public housing cooperation have their own housing queue systems and rules.

For five years...since 2013. They told me it would take between one and five years. When it had been almost five years they told me between five and ten years! What should I do? The whole time, it is as if there is something that...it's like a barrier in front of me. When I reach, I'm stopped again. Something is in the way. Now I'm really scared. I don't know what to do. It's only one month left here.

Whilst living in a sublet flat, Nora had been working full-time as a cleaner for four months when I interviewed her, but she was worried that she would not be able to keep her job if she became homeless again.

In Sweden, there are no 'to let' signs in the street, no high street letting agencies or hand-written signs in the news agents. There are thus no physical and visual places that house hunters can turn to. While conducting this research, I nevertheless noticed how, in some neighbourhoods, people did put up hand-written notes on bus stops and on communal notice boards. However, mostly the mothers had to use other strategies when trying to find both temporary and more long-term housing solutions for themselves and their families. Strategies have been described as:

...general prescriptions which actors [households] take into account when making plans within structural constraints. Actors may not themselves refer specifically to strategies; we infer their existence from the accounts they give of their plans (Anderson, Bechhofer & Gershuny 1994, p. 21)

The concept of strategy has been advanced in housing studies as a way of understanding the decision-making process of individuals and households in acquiring housing (Crowe & Hardey 1991; Pickvance & Pickvance 1994). There have also been debates about the utility of the concept, especially for households with the fewest choices in society (Crowe 1989). However, one could argue that there is a risk in discounting marginalized people's ability to strategize. The agency exercised by people in poverty, which is about coping with regular demands of life as well as trauma, is often misrecognised in activation measures implemented through welfare agencies (Lister 2004). For the women in this study, taking action to solve difficult housing situations was about coping and surviving – the only other option was to give up. Yet, despite the circumstances, they rarely did, even in the most difficult of situations. The reason they gave for continuing to try was their children. Strategies emerging from my interviews can be clustered into three different groups:

- Searching internet sites and social media adverts
- Asking around in social networks, including ethnic networks, and in religious establishments
- Asking for help from social services

All women used a combination of these strategies at different times depending on the situation they were in at a given time. However, their ability to use the internet and social media was also dependent on their language, literacy, computer skills and psycho-social conditions. Not all of them had smartphones with 4G or access to a computer other than in public spaces such as the library. Depending on their background, some had stronger social networks or connections with ethnic or religious communities, which also had an impact on their ability to draw on such resources.

### **The internet-based sublet market**

Although Sweden's housing system is designed to grant equal access, it is increasingly contributing to situated inequalities that are shaped through what the American sociologist Joan Ackers has referred to as 'gendered and racialized class relations', which 'stands for the multiple practices that create differing and unequal situation in access to and control over the means of provisioning and survival' (2006, p. 55). British sociologists Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have suggested that this is because as 'concrete social relations, class, gender and race/ethnicity are enmeshed in each other and the particular intersections involved produce specific effects' (1983, p. 63). One effect is the situated unequal access to adequate housing among different social groups.

When households are unable to access housing through the regular housing market, they are forced to seek alternative routes. The route most commonly encouraged by public officials is the sublet market. However, despite the fact that it is often households with limited financial means that are forced to look for housing through this route, it is the most expensive, insecure and discriminatory part of the Swedish housing market. My informants told me that it was difficult because many who publish online adverts did not want children in their flats. Gloria told me about one such incident:

I found a flat...I called the person...‘Oh, if you have a dog or you smoke...you know...’. I said, ‘No, I don’t smoke, I have no dog, no cat, but I have a child’. Then she said, ‘No, sorry’.

All of the mothers had experiences of being refused a viewing because of their children, but for Nora this was a particular problem because she had six children:

You know the problem is that when I call on an advert on Blocket or on Facebook and ask if I can come and look. Then they ask, ‘How many children do you have? You have six children!? Oh sorry, but then we can’t’. All the time, my children are in the way. Maybe they are scared, you know, that something will break. But it is expensive as well, the sublets, do you know how much it costs? A two-bedroom flat can be 17,000 SEK!

Between 2009 and 2017, the rents for secondary sublets of rental properties increased with 59 per cent and for cooperative flats with 84 per cent. This was three to four times more than the increase in household incomes. A rental flat that is sublet has on average a rent that is 65 per cent higher than on the regular market. The sublet rent for a cooperative flat is on average 138 per cent higher than the rents on the regular market. In 2017, the average sublet rent for a rental studio flat advertised online was 10,537 SEK per month in greater Stockholm and for a sublet cooperative studio flat 13,243 SEK per month (Boverket 2018). The average rents showed above were based on calculations made on the basis of flats advertised through various internet sites, out of which the most commonly cited is a site called *Blocket*. Furthermore, in most cases the person letting the flat asks for between one and three months’ rent in deposit. This should be compared with the rent of a studio flat in the old housing stock on the regular market allocated through the housing exchange, where the rent can be as low as 4,000 SEK per month and no deposit is required. A two-bedroom flat in the old housing stock can cost around 7,000 SEK and was seen as affordable by the families in this study.

Since 2013, the NBHBP has been assigned responsibility by the government to follow the development on the sublet market. In 2015, they conducted a survey where people who had experience of renting on the sublet market were asked about their experiences of house searching online. Twenty-five per cent of the 588 respondents answered that they had encountered fraudsters and ten per cent had been tricked to pay deposits and advanced rents without securing a flat. Thirty-eight re-

spondents said they had been subject to threats, violence or assault and three people answered that they had been offered housing in exchange for sex. Forty-nine per cent of the respondents had a monthly income that was less than 20,000 SEK per month and twenty-four per cent had children (Boverket 2015). In their latest report from 2018, the NBHBP concludes that those most likely to live on the sublet market are people with difficulties entering the regular market. They further say that:

The income among those that rent on the sublet market is often lower. There are indications that those that live in sublets in many cases have a difficult financial situation and have difficulties in covering basic needs. Especially women have more strained situations, due to lower disposable incomes (Boverket 2018, p. 8).

The sublet market is, however, more than one market, as it operates within different spheres, and there is both a regulated and an unregulated side to it. A person with a rental contract who wishes to sublet their flat should ask for permission from the landlord and is not allowed to earn any money on this arrangement. Landlords usually agree to sublets if the tenant works or studies temporarily in a different town or if they want to try to live with a partner. An owner of a market-based cooperative flat needs to ask the board of the cooperation for permission, but is allowed to set the rent themselves. However, it is always the first-hand tenant that decides whom they let their flat to and a majority prefer to let to people with good incomes and references from previous landlords. As housing has become harder to come by, people ask for more money, more flats are let illegally and a black market, where contracts are being sold in exchange for cash, has developed (Listerborn 2018). Furthermore, although knowledge about the nature of the sublet market is limited, there appear to be different strata on the sublet market too (Boverket 2011). There is a high-end market in central Stockholm for those that can afford the higher rents and that are seen as more attractive tenants, whilst there is a lower-end market in the distressed peripheral estates in shared flats for lodgers.<sup>31</sup> Here, according to my informants, a

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<sup>31</sup> In its report from 2018, the NBHBP states that there are difficulties in gaining an accurate overall picture of the secondary housing market in Sweden because of the unregulated nature of this market. The NBHBP is only able to make estimates regarding the size of the market and rent levels based on data from websites, surveys and companies that are specialized in offering letting services on behalf of those who want to let and those who want to rent (Boverket 2018). The unregulated nature of this market means that it is difficult to track issues like discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, income or gender. However, from my interviews and observations in online forums, many landlords specifically state that they do not want tenants with children or who are in receipt of benefits.

room in a shared flat can cost between 2,500 and 4,500 SEK. This is where the mothers I spoke to ended up living most of the time.

Although I have divided up the 'internet' and 'network' markets for analytical purposes, it is important to recognise that they are interlinked. When I asked Amal how she went about looking for housing, she said:

Like everybody else...on Blocket, or Facebook or I have asked around among people I know. It is exhausting...it is stressful...We have to move schools and nurseries...how are the children going to react...

Amal was the only woman in this research who returned to live with her husband. Amal first stayed in a women's shelter after she had called the police because of domestic violence and then she was moved to a hostel. The hostel was far away from the school and she and her children were sharing space with drug addicts and people with mental health problems. She found it difficult to cope and did not think she received enough help from social services. Amal told me:

My husband found a flat when I called him and told him about the situation. He wanted to help me. So he found this flat. He said there is an advert...he said, 'Take this advert and contact her'. I wrote to the woman who had the flat, but she wanted a deposit of 14,000. I called my social worker and she said, 'We cannot pay the deposit, but we can pay the rent for one and a half month, then it stops'. She also said that her municipality agreed to pay for illegal sublets, but she said that she didn't think the other municipality would. They said to me that they know there are not many legal contracts and therefore they agree to illegal sublets.

Amal was the only mother who told me that her social worker had acknowledged that they could pay for illegal sublets. Yasmin did, however, get her rent paid in a temporary sublet without having to show an agreement from the housing company. However, without contract and the correct paperwork it is not possible to apply for housing benefits, which was often an issue for mothers when they were renting a room in a shared flat. Another issue was the insecurity of sublets. After only four months in the sublet that Amal described above, the public housing company that owned the flat found out that it was sublet on illegal terms. They gave Amal and her family three months' notice to find something else.

During the two years that I followed Gloria's situation, she lived in two different sublets and was actively looking online. She describes one of her experiences as follows:

First the man had said six months. I said, 'If it is only six months it's not much. Then I don't want it'. He said, 'Okay, it's just to start with. If it works out, I can give you one year, maybe two, as I don't live there with my family'. So I went and saw the flat. No actually, he told me to come to his office to sign the contract and then I could see the flat. When I saw the flat, it was really small, but I needed somewhere to live so I said fine. Compared to the hotel, I preferred this flat. There were too many cameras and everything, it was too stressful there. So I took the flat, thinking I could stay there for at least one year. Then after four months the man changed his mind. He said his brother had become homeless. He said sorry but he had to take the flat back. So I had to leave the flat. I was begging him. I said, 'I'm pregnant. I'm going to give birth in March'. He said, 'I'm sorry but there is one month's notice and then you have to leave'. So I had to leave the flat on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February and the baby was born twenty days later. So then I came to this hotel.

I went to visit Gloria in several of the hostels and houses where she stayed, and one of the places was the flat that she was asked to leave after three months. It was in a block of flats in one of Stockholm's most distressed neighbourhoods that was converted to a housing cooperative during one of the 'right-to-buy' schemes encouraged by Stockholm's city council over the past thirty years. The flat was situated on the ground floor. As I walked in I noticed that it was a studio flat with an American kitchen that had been converted to a one-bedroom flat. However, the bedroom was so small that only a small bed could fit in it and there was no window. The landlord charged 10,000 SEK plus fees for electricity and internet on top. In the same area, in the flats across the road that belong to a public housing company, tenants pay 10,000 SEK for a spacious three-bedroom flat. Yet, due to the lack of other options, as Gloria explained, she thought it was the best she could get and social services were willing to support her with part of the rent as it was cheaper than a hostel. She had spent a lot of time travelling around Stockholm visiting flats, but this was the best option. Another place she had visited, she described as follows:

He told me that it was a studio flat. I went and I saw it was a two-bedroom flat. It was a two-bedroom flat with two showers, kitchen...I arrived, I went in and there was a hallway...you enter like this...on your right hand side there was a bathroom and a hallway...on the left there was a door to the kitchen...then there was a door which was to the room...In the room there was another door which led to the living room. It was straight ahead from the hallway. In the living room there was a bed, sofa and TV. The landlord said he slept there but only Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I said, 'But you told me it was a studio flat'. He said, 'No, it is a two-bedroom flat'. There was another entrance door and another room. So this person would not have to enter through the same entrance, but would have to come into the flat to use the bathroom and the kitchen. That person had children. He said, 'This is the kitchen, but you can't cook pork. We are Muslims. You can cook here, but not pork'. He said, 'I'm only here Friday, Saturday and Sunday. You pay 6,500 SEK per month'. I thought, 6,500 for a room...I asked him, 'Can I use this address?' He said, 'Oh, I'm not sure because I don't want to lose my flat'. I asked, 'Why don't you want me to put my address here?' He said, 'Oh, because I might get into trouble'.

Leila, who came to Sweden as a child and who had returned with children after living in another EU country, was also actively looking on the internet. After one and a half years of searching, she finally found a woman willing to let a flat to her. When I met her she had just moved in and was looking forward to starting to work as well. When I asked her how she found the sublet, she told me:

Well, I found it...you know, one of the criteria for social services to help you is that you have to actively search for housing all the time. So from the beginning I was looking all the time. It's not many people that respond when you have no income and when you are not in work, you know. But I always wrote to people, because it was one of the criteria. Every month I had to apply for about 20 flats and I had to hand it in in writing. So I was applying very actively and sometimes I went for viewings. When they asked me about my situation, they could say, 'We'll be in touch', but nobody ever got in touch. But then this woman...her flat had been empty since she bought it. She bought it as an investment. She lives in [another municipality]. She had tried to get rid of it and sell it. So when I came along, you know, it had been empty and she was paying her mortgage anyway so she thought, I guess she took a risk with me. She knew of my situation but said, 'It's okay as long as you pay on time'.

There were also mothers who put out their own adverts online. Mounia could not speak Swedish, but a Swedish couple she had met through a food bank helped her to write a notice on Facebook. She was contacted and offered to stay in the basement of a large terrace house in one of Stockholm's more affluent areas. Mounia and her daughters could stay there for free if she would help to clean the ground floor and tidy the kitchen. Initially she thought it was fine, but then she told me that the woman and her children changed. The landlady, a white Swedish woman who was a manager in a big company, started to make more demands. She wanted Mounia to take her hijab off and she told her that if she was going to stay she had to clean the whole house. Finally, the relationship came to a head:

Once she came running downstairs and she knocked on the door. She started to talk to me about the cleaning, but I didn't understand. My daughter had to interpret. I said, 'Please can you speak calmer'. I said to her, 'It is not that I don't want to help you. It is your way of treating me. It is your behaviour. This is why I said no to cleaning the top floor. I'm also a mother. The way you treat me in front of my children... I say good morning and you don't respond. Your children don't greet us. How can we continue to live here? If you can be so kind and let me stay a little bit and I will find somewhere else to live with my girls'. She said, 'Ah so you don't want to clean upstairs? Then fuck off!' I promise, she said this in front of my daughter. She was the one that had to translate...'Fuck off!' I understood...but in front of my children!

Mounia's experience with this family was traumatic and in the interview she went into more detail than in the excerpt above. She said to me, 'I came here to change my life. I don't want to accept that I'm treated badly'. She said she was fine with having to clean and do domestic services, but that she still wanted to be treated with respect and as a human being. Other mothers were also visibly upset, some started crying, when they told me about abusive and demeaning situations. To be treated in such ways in front of their children was felt as particularly dehumanizing and humiliating. To also be dependent on the person that had treated them with disrespect became difficult for the mothers to bear and often triggered another move.

## The network market

The flats or rooms that were available on 'the network market' were similar to those on the 'internet market', although from the mothers' accounts it seemed to be easier to find cheaper alternatives through this route. Embeddedness in ethnic groups or other informal networks played an important role when women tried to solve their housing needs. The housing situation facing mothers with weaker social capital and more limited knowledge of Swedish resembled that of undocumented migrants in Sweden and elsewhere (Mahler 1995; Burgers 1998; Khosravi 2010). In an ethnographic study involving undocumented migrants in greater Stockholm, the anthropologist Shahram Khosravi (2010) describes strategies similar to the ones discussed by participants in my research. He explains that his informants were always hunting for new places to move to and that they moved frequently. Khosravi further concludes that ethnic networks are the most common channel for finding housing in this group and that they tend to 'end up in less-attractive areas with huge concentrations of migrants from the same region' (p. 104). Ethnic networks, Khosravi says, do, however, 'not necessarily mean ethnic solidarity' (ibid.). This was also reflected in the stories shared with me.

My informants told me about people who tried to exploit their vulnerable situation and people who genuinely tried to help. In between, there were those who were both trying to help and wanted to earn some extra money or get free domestic help. In the former case it was often other single mothers with a secure tenancy who would sublet a room or let the family sleep in the living room in exchange for cash. Asma described one such set-up as follows:

It was really difficult. Many children and two mothers in just three rooms. We used to sleep in the living room – me and the children. I bought two mattresses and I used to sleep on the sofa. I lived there between August and December and paid 2,000 SEK. Then I said, 'I'm sorry, Hibaq, but this life is too hard. You have five children and I have two, we will not cope like this'. She understood and I moved to another room elsewhere.

There were two key strategies used to access housing through networks – to ask friends or to ask acquaintances and strangers in ethnic or religious settings, for example, a church or a mosque. Two women who had previously lived in women's shelters run by charities also relied on continued support from staff there. Sama was, for example, staying temporarily in a shared flat that she had accessed through a charity she had received long-term support from. She told me:

As a single mother, thanks to this organisation. I have...I'm more privileged, I feel, because it exists. Not because of the authorities. I haven't had to go through the worst part. There is a lot of people out there who don't have this resource.

Darya had a similar experience where she had received support from the same women's shelter several times and where staff had helped her in contacts with social services. Before she and her children were granted leave to remain in Sweden, she had also asked for help from different churches and on two occasions she had stayed in the homes of people she had met through this route.

Sometimes the line between help and favours was blurred, as is illustrated in the following account by Mounia. Through ethnic networks, she had met a man who was the caretaker of a mosque at the outskirts of Stockholm. When she had nowhere to go, he let her and her children stay in the mosque before putting her in touch with a family that she could stay with.

There was a small room, smaller than this one [referring to the room in which the interview took place]. On the floor there were mattresses and he said, 'If you want to you can stay here. Then we can see where you can go' [...] After I stayed there for 15 days. It was cold. The heating was off as it was the beginning of June. It was cold because it was in the basement. The man brought me a sofa and blankets. He asked if I had money. I said, 'At the moment yes'. He showed me where to buy food and things for the girls. He helped me a lot and he gave me 500 SEK. Then he took me to his cousin. His cousin is married to a Swedish woman and they have four children. I think he brought me there because the woman needed some help. He said, 'You can live here but you need to help the woman'. I had to accept it. I said, 'That's fine' [...] Then after a while the woman said she did not want any more children than her own in the house. It was a flat with three bedrooms and the living room. So we had one room, her children one and she and her husband another one. She said her children were not used to sharing a room...all four of them. So she asked me to leave. I asked, 'Where should we go?' She said, 'It's not my problem'.

In the interviews, many different areas in greater Stockholm were mentioned to me as places where the families had stayed during shorter or longer periods. Most of those areas were peripheral estates with a high concentration of residents with mi-

grant backgrounds and low incomes. Naima, who worked as a nurse in one of those areas, said to me:

I think it is easier to find somewhere to stay specifically in this area. Probably because here people know how vulnerable some families are and they try to help each other. Then of course there are those that profit financially as well. Let's say there is a market here in [name of area] for this. Quite a few families that go abroad and that sublet their flats. That seems to be quite common.

Naima, who also grew up in this place, described how, despite the poverty and hardship which are characteristic of the area, there is a lot of mutual support also between strangers. At the same time, there are some people that try to exploit or abuse people in vulnerable positions. She mentioned the risks and pressure that some women that are desperate for shelter are at risk of being exposed to:

These women are really vulnerable. It is not uncommon for us to hear stories that if the women do this or that it can make it easier...to get a sublet or a room. The women are asked really sick things...like selling sex. So someone who wants to abuse her vulnerable position by saying that 'if you give me sex you can stay at my place, but it has to be on the condition that I can have sex with you whenever I want'. It's horrible. It's really horrible, but this is the reality.

Mounia told me about such an incident when she was staying with a man that she had come in contact with through a woman in the mosque. His suggestions made her leave after only one week. Other informants told me about strange proposals they had received when they had answered adverts on the internet. Sara was one of them and she recalled an incident where a man had told her to come without her daughter, which she refused. The potential vulnerability of homeless single women and children is also something which was raised by Asma, not only in relation to her own situation, but also in relation to other families that she knew. She said that she thought that authorities should have a duty to follow up how children actually live:

If a homeless family has children that are younger than 15 years old they need to check where they stay. I have seen so many homeless families with children who are getting hurt.

When I asked her in what way, she answered:

They live with a criminal family because they have nowhere to go. They stay with a criminal cousin or with a family with teenagers that are criminal. I saw many flats where there is hashish and drugs and they live there because they don't know what to do. The person with a first-hand contract abuses the family that has nowhere to live [...] Once, I remember, my friend she has four children and they have asthma and always have a cold. The guy they stayed with was smoking hashish. I said to him, 'Why are you smoking when the children are here?' He said, 'It's my house'. Sweden really needs to control more. The children here have a hard life.

She proceeded by telling me about numerous difficult situations that she had encountered during the four years that she was living as a lodger or staying with friends. During one period she was renting a room from an older woman from the same country of origin as herself. She was living on her own, but had grown up children that sometimes came to visit with their families. Asma recalled what happened and told me this is why she left:

In the evening she called me and said, 'Come look at the mobile'. She had married a man who lived in Africa. She told me to send him messages and write things like 'Did you get the money I sent' or 'I'm sorry I shouted at you'. She wasn't able to write in her language so I had to do it for her every day. Look at the mobile and write messages. The last time before we moved she took off all her clothes. She said to me, 'Come and give me a massage'. She was lying on a mattress on the floor in front of the children. I said, 'No, never! Put your clothes on'. I said, 'No, never!'

Ayomi had also found a flat through people she knew, but although she lived in the flat by herself with her two children, the landlord was still registered at the same address. This meant that she counted as a lodger and could only get a limited amount in housing benefit despite paying a high rent. This was common and relates back to some of the economic issues raised in chapter five. The inadequate housing situations facing these mothers meant that cash transfers designed to help the most disadvantaged families did not always reach those most in need.

## The limits of altruism

Previous research involving single mothers in Sweden has emphasised the important principle of maintaining an autonomous household and managing without having to 'ask for favours' or 'being a burden' (Gardberg Morner 2003). Similar ideals were expressed by the women in this study. Yet, it was situations of dependency, disempowerment and insecurity that emerged as a strong consequence of their living circumstances. Yasmin found it particularly difficult. At one point, she and her children were supported temporarily by a church and thereafter they moved in with an acquaintance. When I spoke to her at the time, she said:

She is very supportive and encouraging. She says, 'This is just temporary, you will find your own place. Don't think about it, it's okay'. But yet I think about her. She comes home from work and my children are running around. I'm sure they disturb her, but she is still kind.

Although Yasmin was trying to find somewhere else, she failed, and eventually the relationship broke down and went sour. She was asked to leave. To co-habit, more than one family, with children in small spaces, generally in one-, two- or three-bedroom flats (in some cases even studio flats) seemed to work for limited periods of time, but as the title of this section suggests, there is a limit to altruism. Eventually, the mothers and their children were asked to leave, whether they paid a rent or not.

After her divorce, Helen and her two teenage children stayed for eight months with a friend in a one-bedroom flat. Her friend did not want any money for rent, but eventually the situation became untenable. One of Helen's children had special needs and they were all sharing the bedroom while her friend was sleeping in the sitting room. Helen's friend was working nights and was disturbed by the noise. Finally, she asked Helen to take her children and leave. She had to turn to social services for help with emergency assistance for shelter. Helen was given help by social services, but this was not the case for everyone. Yasmin was told that she could not get any help when she had to leave her acquaintance. Before eventually finding a temporary sublet, she and her three children stayed with a family member in a studio flat for two months. The situation was fraught with difficulties due to the overcrowded and tense situation. Seven of the women had some family in Sweden, usually siblings, cousins or distant relatives, but they did not feel that they could stay for any longer periods of time with them.

In decision letters from social services, as well as case notes, there were often notes saying that the mother had ‘a social network’ that she could ask for support. Those assumptions seemed to be made on rather loose grounds, as, according to the mothers themselves, their friends or relatives did not want to have them staying with them. Nora, who had several siblings in the area where she was registered, said they could help her for one or two nights, but not more. She had six children. Sometimes one of them stayed at their uncle’s or aunt’s, but they could not all stay in the same place together. Another example was Hanna, who was taken in by a woman who she met at the Council house, whom she said was nice but who kept asking her to find somewhere else. Furthermore, the woman was smoking in the flat, something that Hanna was not happy for her children to be exposed to. In Hanna’s case notes from social services, I could see that someone had written that while she was sitting in the reception many people from her country had greeted her. This meant, it was concluded, that she had a social network. When I asked Hanna about the comment, she responded, ‘We greet each other because we are from the same country, this doesn’t mean I know them or that they will let me stay in their house’ (not verbatim).

The arguments put forward by the informants for why these types of arrangements failed were reflective of findings from research in the US. Although social networks and social support are often described as essential additional safety nets for very low-income families, there is no evidence that this is a solution to homelessness. It is rather the opposite. Doubling up instead tends to contribute to an erosion of social relationships and a reduction of social capital (Skobba & Goetz 2015). Wallace and Bassuk have pointed out that:

Such a precariously housed situation is stressful, frequently leading to severe conflict among mothers and children. Sometimes, if the tensions are mutually acknowledged and the families part amicably, the mothers describe ongoing friendly relationships. However, when the sojourn ends in severe conflict, the relationship is sometimes permanently disrupted (1991, p. 489).

Marginalized single mothers, particularly those with migrant backgrounds, tend to have fewer essential and personal domestic resources and are therefore more vulnerable in a progressively deteriorating housing market. This might also be the underlying explanatory factor to why single mothers are over-represented among the families that turn to social services for support. All of the informants had experiences of doubling up with family or friends, but none of those arrangements had been perma-

ment or long-lasting. Many of their friends and family lived in small flats or were inadequately housed themselves, which meant that any support given was seen as temporary rather than as a solution to the problem.

## **Finding a home**

The 'network market' could, however, also be a way of finding more stable sublets or even a permanent tenancy. After almost two years of moving between hostels, hotels and short-term sublets, Gloria finally found a flat in a village two hours away from Stockholm. She told me:

I found the flat through a friend of a friend. I had talked to everybody. I told everybody that I was looking for a place to live. It was this person's daughter who had the flat. She got married and moved to another city and she was leaving this flat. This is how I found it. The landlords were happy with me and now I'm going to move. Of course it's a village, but the flat is big enough and the place is okay. But for me, if everything necessary is there, that you know that you can organise your life it's ok. There is a school and a nursery and a care home where maybe I can work. If you work and have the kids next door and you can pick them up without stress, then it's fine. Instead of having everything in different places. Also to have your own place without people telling you how to live your life. Not having to go to social services again...

Gloria felt happy with her decision, although it meant that her children could not see their father very often and she moved away from all her support networks. However, she said she would remain in the housing queue in Stockholm and maybe one day she could come back.

Sara was offered a sublet through the support of a charity and Alice was offered a permanent contract through a friend that knew a landlord who was happy to accept her as a tenant. Both were able to remain in greater Stockholm. It was two small studio flats, but they offered security and stability. Finally, Yasmin got hold of a more long-term four-year contract through a 'middle-man' that she knew from her old neighbourhood. She was of course very happy, but as I wrote in my notes after visiting, this arrangement could only be described as another consequence of the dysfunctional housing market in greater Stockholm:

I went to visit Yasmin today. She was really happy as she had secured a tenancy with a private landlord and is now hopefully able to stay put indefinitely. This is the best housing situation she has had since I first got to know her. However, I cannot help feeling concerned about the set-up. The flat is in an old care home, which was closed down in 2015. The flats themselves are rather nice – a big kitchen, one large room and a balcony. Yasmin has made it homely for herself and the children. However, the rent is high – 10,000 SEK per month for a studio apartment in a 1970s building on a peripheral estate.

As I arrived, the lift was out of function and a man that passed by said it was because there was a fire alarm and it had been disabled. Somebody had kicked a big hole in a glass door and sharp pieces of glass were sticking out just on the height of a toddler. I had to walk up the stairs to the fourth floor. As I arrived on the landing I saw a long corridor with about five doors on each side. I recognised the layout of the old care homes built in the 1970s – so many places where I have visited homeless families across Stockholm look exactly like this. Old care homes that councils have closed down and now need to fill or get rid of. In this case it was sold to a private housing company only a few years ago. I have previously visited a mum in the building next door to this one. It is identical, but on some floors there are still elderly people living and on one floor there is a privately run hostel that lets studio flats to social services for 850 SEK per night. That is a monthly rent of 25,000. On the regulated housing market these flats would cost no more than 5-6,000 SEK.

Yasmin tells me that she has signed a contract with a middle man and not the housing company itself. I've seen this kind of set-up before – the landlord lets the whole block to a middle-man who guarantees the original rent, but can take out a higher rent from the tenants and make a profit. The middle-man has also been charged with decorating the flats. Some flats are marketed as one-bedroom flats as a dividing wall has been erected, but the size is the same as the studio flats. The additional room has no window. Those flats go for 11,500 SEK. Yasmin heard of the flats from a friend and called the middle-man. Social services agreed to the rent and she was able to move in. I ask her, 'Who else lives here?' She says, 'Mostly Arabs – many families with children'. As I leave a few hours later, the lift is still disabled. In the entrance you can hear the beep of the fire alarm and there is a light flashing. Nobody has attended to turn it off. There is clearly no fire – this time – but how long would it take for somebody to attend if there was one for real? I can't help thinking about Grenfell Tower as I walk out. The set-up with a

management company is all too familiar. I take a look at the names on the board in the entrance. There must be at least 60 studio flats in this building and all names are Arab and East African. These tenants are unlikely to be members of the Tenants Association. They are also unlikely to complain. They have a place to live and for now, just like for Yasmin, this is what matters. A few hundred metres away from this building, there is a big building site. Private property developers are building new apartments targeting a young urban professional class. Here, studio flats also cost around 10,000 SEK, but families like Yasmin's are not welcome. Their income is too low and the restrictions regarding how many people are allowed in a studio flat means that no family with more than one child would be accepted. The segregation that Sweden's politicians are talking so much about as a problem, is allowed to flourish just a few hundred meters away from the local council building. Yet, the details of the growing disparities are surrounded by silence.

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have addressed the 'housing conditions' and 'housing options' that are available to some of the most vulnerable families that are homeless and excluded from the regular housing market in metropolitan Stockholm. The maldistribution of housing as a resource forced my informants to look for housing in what I refer to as a 'parallel' housing market. Despite catering for the most marginalized segment in the Swedish society, this part of the housing market is characterised by insecurity, lack of rights, vulnerability and forced dependency. Sublet flats and lodgings on the sublet market advertised on the internet are also the most expensive. Those that have the least resources are forced to pay the highest cost – both financially and psychologically. My informants told me that they had talk to everybody they knew about their housing troubles and that social and ethnic networks were an important route to finding somewhere to live. However, social networks tend to offer temporary rather than lasting solutions and the longer families are forced to double or triple up in cramped spaces, the more likely those solutions are to erode relationships. Finally, the potential for this group to find 'a home' appeared to be dependent on 'chance' and the mother's own efforts, rather than support through statutory services. Furthermore, although these homes offered security and stability, they were not always adequate in terms of size or affordability.

## INTERFACING WITH SOCIAL SERVICES

In this chapter, I will introduce the informants' experiences of interfacing with social services in events of acute homelessness. When marginalized single mothers experience long-term housing exclusion and homelessness, they are likely to turn to social services on an intermittent basis. However, at the same time as more families with children turn to social services for help, the question of 'responsibility' is increasingly contested (Samzelius 2018; Swärd 2018a; Knutagård 2019; Björkhagen Turesson 2019; Sahlin 2020). How is this contention played out in the meetings between social workers and clients? In the previous chapters, I portrayed the mothers' difficult financial situations and the transitional nature of their primary source of income. I also described their attempts to secure housing on the 'parallel' housing market. The women themselves described how their lack of income security was intertwined with their housing troubles. In this chapter, I will discuss how this 'double burden' fails to fit neatly into the institutional and organisational structures of social services. As a result, clients, in this case mothers with children, experience how ad-hoc social service practices are developed organically in response. They also report what they see as inconsistent, illogical, ill-informed and disempowering working methods.

I will begin this chapter by describing a social assistance system based on discretion, where social workers are expected to both offer support and implement control mechanisms. The inherent contradictions in the Swedish social assistance system have been discussed by welfare scholars over many years, but little appears to have changed as it continues to operate on the basis of 'a poor-relief' logic (Panican & Ulmestig 2015). Through the experiences shared in this chapter, a picture emerges where the same logic as is used in attempts to 'activate the unemployed' is also

used, albeit in an ad-hoc fashion, to ‘activate the homeless’. This, in turn, is translated into different methods and measures aimed at ‘keeping out’ (gatekeeping), ‘control’ (activation measures), ‘punishment’ (sanctions), and ‘exit’ (focus on ‘any’ rather than ‘adequate’ housing). Finally, I will address the difficulties in challenging this form of decision-making within a system based on discretion and interpretation for individuals that are hermeneutically marginalized.

## **Discretion and conditionality**

The experiences shared by the mothers in this chapter need to be understood within the context of the considerable discretion granted to employees that work with the administration of social assistance in Sweden. The Social Service Act, which regulates all municipal-based social work, is designed as a framework law, primarily stating overarching goals rather than giving specific directions for how client-based activities ought to be carried out (Stranz, Karlsson & Wiklund 2017). The right to apply for social assistance is regulated in the first paragraph of chapter 4 in the Social Service Act, which states that:

Individuals unable to provide for their needs or to obtain provision for them in any other way are entitled to assistance from the social welfare committee for their livelihood and for their living in general. The individual shall, through social assistance, be assured a reasonable standard of living. The assistance shall be designed in such a way as to strengthen his or her resources for independent living.

The actual conceptualization of notions like ‘reasonable standard of living standard’ or ‘the best interest of the child’ is interpreted and concretized by municipalities and their employees (Kjellbom 2009). On the one hand, this allows for freedom for social workers to match clients’ needs with services. Yet, on the other hand, it also permits considerable variation in assessments and decision-making procedures between different municipalities and in relation to different clients (see e.g. Kjellbom 2009; Bergmark 2013; Hjort 2019). As argued by Evelyn Brodtkin:

The ways in which caseworkers use their discretion depend on complex interactions of factors, among them their professional capacity, agency incentives, and the match between the demands of casework and the resources available to them (1997, p. 4).

Practices are developed in response to the difficult conditions in which caseworkers operate and that they have to cope with (Lipsky 1980). One can therefore assume that when new challenges – in this case family homelessness – present themselves, new working practices will develop in response.

The Swedish social assistance system contains inherent contradictions, which are often experienced as arbitrary, stigmatizing and humiliating by claimants (see e.g. Jönsson 2003; Angelin 2009; Ulmestig & Eriksson 2017). It is assumed that applications for social assistance should be handled and assessed in a correct manner, that there is a right to appeal decisions, that the integrity of clients should be respected and that they should have the right to ‘an adequate standard of living’. At the same time, the system also has functions which are focused on control and morality. Social assistance applications are sorted into categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, while also safeguarding the budget of the municipality (Bergmark 2000). Despite several reforms throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Swedish social assistance system continues to be described as a reproduction of the old poor-relief logic (see Johansson 2001; Panican & Ulmestig 2015; Davidsson 2015). People in need do not have a right to receive social assistance, but rather a right to apply for it. This does not guarantee that their claim is approved. Furthermore, a new claim has to be made on a monthly basis. Here, the key role of social service staff is to control who is ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of social assistance for sustenance and emergency accommodation, in line with the guiding principles of their specific local political-institutional context. Without the tools to address an emerging ‘social problem’ (in this case family homelessness), or the organisational space and opportunity to develop awareness of the effects of power, subordination and disempowerment, social workers are unlikely to be able to fully embrace visions of social justice and solidarity (Krumer-Nevo 2017). This imbalance also means that people in need of support are at risk of being subject to symbolic injustice and unwarranted suffering.

Welfare conditionality can broadly be understood as the link between welfare rights, benefits or services and ‘responsible behaviour’ or particular obligations (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018). Although such principles have always been present within the administration of the Swedish welfare state, the changes that I discussed in chapter four have had a profound impact on how those conditions are spelled out and implemented in practice. In 1998, through an amendment to the Social Service Act, Swedish municipalities were granted further powers to impose welfare conditionality on recipients of social assistance. They were granted the legislative authority to impose conditions in the form of ‘activation’ measures and the power to sanc-

tion non-compliance through withdrawal of financial assistance. However, the way this is implemented varies greatly between different national contexts and existing welfare systems. The localism and the strong discretion granted through the Social Service Act in Sweden means that local activation requirements are an optional intervention that municipalities can both require and design to almost any form or size within an imprecise and rule-scarce legislative context (Thorén 2008). Consequently, it is virtually impossible to follow up the effectiveness and outcomes of locally applied measures on any larger scale. In Sweden, it is the exit from social assistance, i.e. case-load reduction, that tends to be in focus and therefore knowledge of the actual consequences for clients is limited (Hjort 2019).

An inherent risk in extensive use of discretion is that it can jeopardize the principles of predictability, legality and equal treatment, in particular if resources are scarce (Hupe & Hill 2007; Molander 2016). Since the 1990s, the cost of social assistance has increasingly been depicted as a problem in Sweden (Hjort 2019). In recent years, it is primarily the cost of alternative housing solutions for people excluded from the regular housing market that has augmented significantly (Boverket 2015). In the city of Stockholm, the cost of emergency accommodation increased with 240 per cent between 2008 and 2018. This includes both singles and households with children, but the largest increase in the homelessness population are families with children (Stockholms stad 2019a). As I explained in chapter four, social services are only bound by law to assist those groups categorized as ‘especially vulnerable’. Mothers and children, like the ones in this research, are generally excluded from this category, which means that any support given is at the discretion of each social service locality. In this environment, what are the potential consequences, and risks, for mothers with children who seek help from social services in housing emergencies? What are the mothers’ experiences of different forms of conditionality and decision-making procedures?

## **Employment and ‘worthiness’**

A consequence of the discretionary element in rights is that certain issues are not taken off the political agenda and political controversies are not closed (Molander 2016). Affordable housing in metropolitan Stockholm is today a scarce resource, and the question of ‘fairness’ in housing allocation has become a contentious and ideologically charged issue. Furthermore, since the end of the 1990s, we have seen an increasingly stigmatizing political discourse on ‘welfare dependency’ (Sahlin 2018). For mothers with insecure sources of income *and* housing troubles, the stig-

ma associated with unemployment and uptake of social assistance becomes intertwined with their experiences of encounters with social service personnel. How this can be played out in practice is illustrated in the following quote taken from Hanna's social service journal notes:

Åsa [the social worker] says in a loud voice to mum that we have a democracy in Sweden and that the housing queue is seven years and people who work need housing. How can mum think that she should get access to housing before them? Åsa doesn't have any flats to give away to mum. Landlords are private corporations, businesses that don't want to pay for housing for people who can't pay and who don't work. Åsa says to mum that she has to work if she wants somewhere to live...<sup>32</sup>

The principles of 'democracy' are here referred to in relation to 'fairness' and housing allocation'. Employment is described as the route to securing housing and it is indirectly implied that those that work are more 'worthy' of housing. It should be noted that when this conversation took place, Hanna was not claiming social assistance for unemployment, but was in receipt of parental leave allowance. She turned to social services because she was homeless. Yet, it was her lack of engagement with the labour market that was stressed as the reason why she was 'unworthy' of housing. As I explained in chapter five, several of the mothers were working, but continued to struggle financially as well as experiencing housing exclusion and acute spells of homelessness. Yet, many of the conversations between mothers and social workers related to me showed that labour-market entry seemed to be a blanket answer to the hardship experienced by these women and their children. The mothers disagreed with this view and argued the contrary, namely, that without stable housing it is very difficult to work. Nora, who was working while having a more stable housing situation in a sublet, told me that:

Their rules are not clear. They are not helpful. I don't understand how they work. I have told them, why are you here in the council if you are not helping? You are

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<sup>32</sup> This quote is taken from social service journal notes shared with me by Hanna. I have translated it from Swedish into English and changed the name of the social worker. At the meeting two social workers were present and one of them has later entered these notes into the system describing what happened and what was said at the meeting. Social workers are required by law to keep journal records of all their interactions with clients. Clients are also entitled by law to ask for copies of all journal entries about their individual case and that of any minors for whom they have custody.

supposed to be here for me and others. The only thing they say is ‘you have to work’. But how can I work when I have nowhere to live? Just give me a hand. Help me to find a flat and I will say goodbye straight away. I will sort my life out. I don’t want to have money from social services. I just want help. A flat for my children... They can help by talking to landlords.

All of the mothers interviewed saw housing as their primary concern, while social workers tended to focus on employment, training and children’s welfare as separate from the housing situation. For the mothers, the logic guiding this separation was difficult to comprehend. ‘Why are they asking me about my children, if they are not going to help us anyway?’ was a common rhetorical question that mothers asked me in conversations. Previous Swedish research concerning single mothers in receipt of social assistance has raised concerns regarding the inadequacy of the organisational structure and regulation of social services in meeting the needs of this particular client group (Stranz & Wiklund 2012; Bergnehr 2016). This research has not taken into account the role of housing, but does point at the difficulties that can arise within a system that primarily focuses on the correction of individual deficiencies without taking structural constraints into account. Making reference to Swift’s (1995) critical analysis of the Canadian child welfare system, Stranz and Wiklund (2015) have also discussed the potential risk that Swedish social services are contributing to ‘the manufacturing of bad mothers’ through poor working practices.

## **Gatekeeping**

A first hurdle for anybody seeking assistance from social services is to prove that they are eligible and a ‘deserving’ claimant. In practice, the distinction between a ‘deserving’ and an ‘undeserving’ claimant is determined by social workers who act as gatekeepers to the financial resources of the municipality (Thorén 2008; Panican & Ulmestig 2016). Several of the mothers in this study described situations where they initially, or intermittently, were denied access when turning to social services in a housing crisis. One of those mothers was Gloria, who was on maternity leave when she first became homeless. This was also her first experience of turning to social services for help. This is how Gloria described to me what happened:

I was renting a flat as a sublet. The woman was racist. She didn’t want us to stay, she said we had to leave the flat because she did not want me to stay. After she finished the contract with the person I was renting from I was trying to talk to her,

to plead, but finally we ended up on the street. We went to social services, but they refused to see me. They told me I have to use the money in my bank account and find a hotel on my own. The only hotel I found that night was [name of hotel]. I found that at midnight. During all that time I was trying to get help, they just told me they wouldn't help me. I even had to sleep in a basement two nights with my baby. I had told them I had slept in the basement and even so they said there is nothing we can do for you. They told the guard in the reception area that, 'If she comes back you should not let her in'. I had an argument with the social worker. I asked, 'How can you say that? That I can't come to social services! If it is like that, do you think I'm coming to your house or what?' That day they didn't help me and I had to go to emergency social services.<sup>33</sup> Even when I called the emergency services...it was far away. I was going with my bag and the pushchair left and right. Finally they gave me a hotel in [name of area] for two days as it was the weekend. They said, 'On Monday you have to go back to social services'. So every day for three weeks I was going to social services and I had to stay the whole day. The social worker did not come out.

Reflecting on what happened to her and several other mothers she met in the council building, she said, 'I don't know if it is to try to put people off. Maybe they think that people have somewhere to live and that they lie or something'. Gloria's situation was complicated because generally access to social assistance requires that: 1) claimants are available to the labour market, and 2) that they are not able to meet their economic needs by other means, for example, parental allowance, sickness benefit, student loan, unemployment benefit or introduction benefit<sup>34</sup> (Panican & Ulmestig 2016). It is thus the financial situation of the mother, rather than the actual housing emergency or any safeguarding concerns, which tends to take precedence in decision-making. Leila, who was eight months pregnant when she had to leave a room where she and her children had lived as lodgers, described her experience of going to emergency social services as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> Emergency social services is a centralized support service open outside of normal office hours. They are able to offer emergency temporary assistance with shelter for the night or the weekend when no other option is available.

<sup>34</sup> A benefit administered by the National Insurance Agency for those newly arrived in Sweden. The maximum amount of time anybody can have this benefit is two years and to be eligible the claimant needs to participate actively in an introduction programme organised through the Public Employment Service.

It was a Thursday or a Friday and she [the social worker] said you need to sort this out by yourself. Then when I called my caseworker she wasn't there and then it was weekend and I was thinking what do I do now? Then what happened was that I had to go to the emergency service and they were...well, you know, now after I can understand...they are also under pressure...so I can have empathy...but they were very much like, 'No, this is not a hotel, it doesn't work like that'. There was a lot of threats as well, 'You know, if you lose your home and have children then you are seen as having made yourself intentionally homeless. Then your children can be taken into care'. This is what this woman said all the time. 'We can sort something out for your children. Because children have rights, but you have put yourself in this situation so you will be seen as being neglectful'. It was a crazy evening. The craziest thing I have ever experienced in my life! It was like, 'Well, it is night-time now. It's February and it is really cold outside. We can place your children, but you are an adult'.

I asked Leila how this made her feel.

It was an awful feeling. Especially when you are pregnant as well, because you already feel really stressed and it was three hours of the same thing over and over. She left me after each conversation and then she came back 20 minutes later and said, 'Can you please repeat what you just told me. Let's start again. How did this happen? She wrote it all down again - about three times she wrote down the same story. It was like being cross-examined, you know. Anyway, I was thinking this is the worst thing I have ever experienced. My children were falling asleep on the couch as it was almost nine o'clock at night. While she left me I was trying to call friends. I had sent text messages and was checking if someone had responded because I was thinking anything would be better than this. It was just awful. Finally, she agreed for me to stay in [name of place] for one night. 'Check in before 10 pm or you will not be let in. You have forty minutes to get there'. That was it and then just goodbye. I was given a small note with the name of the hotel.

Several of the mothers became homeless while on maternity leave, and while some were granted emergency assistance, others were not. For those mothers, like Gloria, who were unable to find friends or family willing to help, sitting in the social service reception area was described as an act of desperation. Eventually, both Gloria's and Leila's social workers used their discretionary powers to grant emergency assistance for temporary accommodation. However, the response in cases where the mother

was deemed 'undeserving' could be heavy-handed if she did not leave voluntarily. Several mothers described how security guards had been called to remove them from the premises, and in some cases the police had been called in as well. Those events took place in different areas of greater Stockholm and independently of each other. The following is an extract from notes by the social services emergency team who were called in by the police after they had been asked to remove Hanna and her two young children:

The police are calling regarding the mother and children as they have been called to the City Hall to remove her and the children. The police squad that arrive do not consider it a police matter and want social services emergency team to take over and take care of the situation. It is agreed that the police can leave as the social services emergency team will attend immediately. The social services emergency team drive to the City Hall and the police is still there as they did not want to leave the mother on her own with the two children.

The mother says that she has been referred to solve her housing situation by herself, which she says she is unable to do. She says that she has no network that can support her and that she has no means. She is sorry that the police have been called twice this week to remove her in a situation where she feels completely powerless.

The social services emergency team decide to drive her to [name of hostel] where she has left her belongings and where they can receive her. She has been staying at [name of hostel] since Monday 17.11 when the social services emergency team helped her there. Tuesday 18.11 she paid 500 SEK for the room and has a debt of 295 SEK to pay when the child benefit arrives. Last night she was unable to pay and has a total debt of 1,095 SEK.

When she is asked if there is any money on her account she says she does not know as she has lost her phone. The social services emergency team help her to look at her account, but she is unable to log in as she has forgotten the password. She has most probably received the child benefit today. The mother has a debt of 1095 and when she has paid for this night she will only have 200 SEK left. Next payment of maternity benefit is due on 27.11.

The social services emergency team have been notified by the social service caseworker that the mother has a network that can support her and that she has her own means. The social service emergency team claim that in the acute situation, judged from the behaviour of the mother, she obviously lacks a network that can

help her with housing, alternatively she lacks the ability to ask them for help. Furthermore, in principle she has no means if she pays for this night's lodgement. The social services emergency team find reason for a needs assessment as the mother from tomorrow has no means to pay for accommodation and sustenance for herself and the children until the 27.11 when her maternity pay arrives.

Situations of this nature were described as humiliating, dehumanizing and disempowering. When she told me about the experience of having to turn to social services on a daily basis for several weeks, in a similar way as described by Gloria and Leila, Ayomi said she had felt like a 'beggar'. The extract above, describing Hanna's situation, also draws attention to the focus on financial resources, both in terms of social service decision-making procedures and in terms of what abject poverty and destitution can look like in a welfare state like Sweden.

Gatekeeping, however, is not only about the assessment of 'deserving' or 'undeserving' claimants, but can also involve different procedures which make a service more or less accessible for people. Most social service offices had restricted telephone times, for example, from 9 to 10 in the morning. New claims need to be made over the phone rather than in person. Asma described what happened after she was told to leave a room she had rented with only a one-day notice. The husband of the woman she had been renting from came back from a stay abroad and told her to leave. She went to social services to ask for help, but was told to call back the following day. Asma told me:

I called this number, but they said... a woman called Eva... I remember her name. She shouted at me... When I spoke to her she said, 'Aha, aha, aha, ok'. When the interview was finished she said, 'Unfortunately, we are not the housing exchange. Who told you to contact social services? You are irresponsible and unplanned...' I told her, 'If you have met people who are irresponsible and unplanned, I'm not one of them'.

Asma was told she could not get any support, but as she did not know what to do, she went back to social services the following day.

I was sitting in the reception and a woman came up to me and asked, 'What is your name? Why are you sitting here?' I told her, 'I'm homeless and my children are unwell'. She said, 'We have no housing for you, but you can sit here and rest for a bit if you want'. I was sitting and sitting until 3 pm. Then the woman I spoke

to the day before called me on my mobile. She said, 'I heard that you are sitting in the reception with your children. I said, 'Yes'. She said, 'We close at 4 o'clock and if you and your children are still here then security guards will throw you out'. I didn't know what to do so I called my mother's sister. She is an old woman who is retired and lives in [name of town two hours away from Stockholm]. I said to her, 'We have to come to you today, because we have nowhere to go...'

The organisation of social services could also be experienced as confusing when mothers were unsure about who was responsible for what. During a period when Yasmin was staying temporarily with an acquaintance, she was trying to access support with housing, but says she 'was going around in circles'.

I called the child welfare team and said, 'I want to speak to someone...' 'Who?' they said. 'You have to have a caseworker'. 'I don't have one so I don't know', I said. 'But I have to be able to see somebody so I can tell you about my problems'. I couldn't give them a name and that was the problem. Once I managed to get hold of somebody from the child welfare team on the phone I told them about my situation and the children and I asked for a meeting. They said, 'We can't book a meeting because we don't know who your caseworker is'. Then they said they wanted to send me to the adult care team. I was calling and calling and sending messages. I contacted the manager, she was helpful. The manager made sure that the social worker responsible for social assistance called me and said, 'I haven't been able to answer your call because I have been busy during the telephone hours'. I said, 'But it is ringing, you are just not answering. You know what my situation is. I call constantly between 9 and 10 and you don't answer'.

Previous research in Sweden has primarily focused on how people facing financial hardship try to avoid applying for benefits because the process is felt as deeply arbitrary, humiliating and stigmatizing (Starrin et al. 2003; Angelin 2009), while less attention has been given to situations like the ones described by my informants, where services are experienced as inaccessible and where mothers with children were banned from applying for assistance. The mothers in this study had on various occasions felt so desperate that they had parked themselves in the reception of social services, 'begging' for help, despite the risk of becoming subject to child welfare investigations as a consequence. The break-down and the downward spiral this

might cause to the relationship between mothers and social workers were also brought up by, Frida, one of the advocacy workers that I interviewed:

I see a pattern. When they first take contact there is a certain relationship and then this changes rather quickly and it becomes more difficult and harder the longer it goes on. Sometimes we have social workers who tell clients, 'I'm not going to see you, I'm not going to talk to you anymore'. In a situation of homelessness, with children, then in the end one becomes so desperate to get a roof over the children's heads. Then the parent is desperate and knocks on doors and goes to social services every day and says, 'Please help me'. They feel like they are going crazy and at the same time social services refuse to see them. This is a really bad combination.

All of the professionals I spoke to expressed similar concerns. They pointed at the impact on both mothers and children when all doors were shut. The suffering and distress experienced by homeless families were described as unbearable and deeply concerning. When mothers were banned from going to social services, they turned to teachers, health-care workers, charities, religious institutions, family, friends and even strangers with desperate pleas for help. Kerstin, an adult education teacher, described such an experience:

It was a Friday afternoon. A mother with a young child had a breakdown and told us she did not know where she was going to sleep. We called the social services emergency team, but they did nothing. They just said, 'Well, unfortunately there is nothing we can do'. I remember thinking this is unbelievable. Back then I thought it was illegal. That this was not allowed, but now...well, I'm more used to it.

Reflecting on these experiences, Kerstin said to me that she had lost trust in the social services in the local authority where she was working.

## **Activating homeless mothers**

During the periods that the mothers were in receipt of support from social services, either through temporary emergency accommodation or through a more long-term social contract, they were required to continuously look for alternative housing. 'Social contracts' have in previous studies been described as arrangements where the tenant has the opportunity to take over the tenancy if they fulfil certain conditions.

None of my informants had been offered such an opportunity. Instead, three mothers had had their contracts ended without any alternative plan for how their housing situation should be resolved. The termination was not due to not fulfilling the conditions for the tenancy, but rather to changed policies within their municipalities. The following extract from notes from an encounter between myself and Sara can serve as an illustration of what many described that they were put through:

‘They have told me, they want to throw me out’, Sara says to me as she wipes tears from her eyes with her scarf. She has come to see me in my office as she wants to talk about how social services expect her to find a flat by herself. Sara has been dependent on support from social services since she had to move three years ago from a room she was renting from another family. Since then, Sara and her child have lived in hostels and in self-contained flats through the support of social services, but there have also been periods when they have had no support and have ended up sofa-surfing in the homes of acquaintances across greater Stockholm. Two months ago, she called me and was happy because they had yet again been offered to stay in a self-contained flat close to her child’s school. However, the stress of not knowing for how long they can stay and where they are going next is getting to her. It is affecting her health and her doctor has expressed concerns.

Sara tells me that her caseworker has told her that she has to continue to look for another place to live all the time when she is not attending her full-time course. She says that she has to look for flats in the evenings and at the weekend all over greater Stockholm and also visit them. Every Wednesday, Sara has to attend a ‘house-searching session’ organised by social services where she is offered help for two hours. I ask her in what way they give her support? Sara, who is not able to use a computer by herself, tells me that the caseworker has created an email account for her. She has also set up a log-in and password on *Blocket*. Sara says, ‘I will show you’ and picks up a hand-written note from her bag. She gives it to me and tells me to log in and look at the applications the caseworker has helped her to do.

I log in and start scrolling down the page where I can see messages and activities. The caseworker has written a short standard message, which has been copied and pasted into a large number of messages sent to people letting flats and rooms across greater Stockholm. The message reads:

*Hello, I'm interested in renting a flat or a room in greater Stockholm. I come from [name of country of origin] and I have a daughter that is six years old. I'm studying Swedish. I have no pets and do not smoke. We are quiet and responsible and look for a place to live for myself and my daughter for a longer period. Is it possible to come and see the flat? I look forward to hearing from you.*

*Kind regards,*

*Sara*

*Phone number: 070-xxx xxxx*

Many of the rooms applied for seem unsuitable for a family – even apartments that are for business purposes only. No consideration is taken of the amount of time the flat is let for (it can be as short as two months), nor of the distance from the child's school. Most messages have never been answered. Those that have responded have often said that the room is too small or that they do not want children. In a few cases she has been informed that the room is already taken or that there have been up to 100 inquiries and that only the 'most suitable candidates' will be invited for a viewing. Sara tells me that she has only been contacted twice and that 'there are many strange people'. Once, a man called her and said she could come for a viewing, but she should not bring her daughter. 'How can I not bring my daughter who I'm going to live with!?' Sara says and shakes her head. She didn't go. Another time, her caseworker told her to leave her class and go and visit a shared flat. She had talked to a woman over the phone, but when she arrived there where men at the flat who told her she had to pay up-front if she wanted a room. She says, 'They want us to live in a shared house with strangers, but I can't do that. It makes me worried'.

Sophia became acutely homeless (again) after she was asked to leave a lodging arrangement with another single mother. When I asked her why she had to leave, she said social services had asked the same thing and she explained that 'it was with a mum who had two big children. When they came home from work, it was difficult for them to have my young children around. That's why they asked us to leave'. Social services agreed to temporary housing for one week in a hostel, but 'they told me all the time that I had to look for somewhere else to live. They were putting pressure on me and asked why I wasn't able to find somewhere to live. But how easy is it to find somewhere in one week?' I told them, 'If you can do it please let me know...' She continued to tell me about the house searching requirements:

Sophia: I had to go to [name of area] every Thursday for two hours and look for flats on *Blocket*.

Tove: Did you have to fill out a list or how was it working? How many flats did you have to look for?

Sophia: Every Thursday after Swedish classes I had to go there for two hours. In these two hours I had to apply for 30 flats. They also had access to our email addresses. From another computer they could check how many flats we had applied for. What we have applied for, what we have written and what people had answered.

Tove: So could they access your account and check?

Sophia: Yes, they had everybody's log-in details. It was the first thing they said, that they needed to have our log-in details. Of course I created a new account for this purpose. Everybody did that.

Sophia was asked to look for 30 flats per week all over Sweden. Other mothers told me about requirements of 20 per week or 20 per month. The highest number mentioned was 40 per week all over Sweden, which was also written on a piece of paper shared with me by one of the mothers. Some were asked to hand over log-in details to private internet accounts and others to take screen shots and send to their social workers. Some were strictly supervised, as in Sophia's case, while others were just asked how the house search was going or encouraged to look by themselves. Hanna, for example, who had experience of different social service locations, told me, 'It is not like in [name of area] where you have to look for a set number of flats, but when I call them and ask for help they tell me I have to find housing by myself'. However, for some it was difficult to look on a daily basis as they lacked access to a computer and sometimes also internet. The key conclusion that can be drawn from the experiences shared, is that there was no consistency, requirements changed over time and the way that social workers controlled that requirements were fulfilled seemed uncoordinated and ad-hoc on a case-by-case basis. Many described the tasks assigned to them as meaningless and aimed at control rather than help. Yasmin describes her experience as follows:

This thing about the house-searching school and those lists. We all know that it gives nothing. It is just to keep us in their control. That is all it is about. Everybody knows that there is no result from attending the house-searching school. Nobody has got a flat from attending the house searching school. I have lived in

Sweden for eight years. I have never seen this before. Only recently in [name of municipality]. I haven't seen or heard about it anywhere else. In other municipalities, even if you can't find a flat at least they offer you some sort of hostel. The house-searching school is just used as an excuse by the local authority. They say, 'Well we have offered them help. They don't want to move anywhere else. Now they have to leave...' That is the only reason why they have it. All they want is for us to disappear as they see us as hopeless cases. They don't want us here...

All of the mothers reported that they had been told that they should look for housing outside of greater Stockholm, and sometimes this was also a condition for continued assistance. Some mothers, for example Asma, said that they would live anywhere and that they were looking everywhere, while others were more reluctant to move outside of the greater Stockholm area. The most common reasons for this were employment, ongoing work-related training, support networks and older children who were unwilling to move. Among those willing to move, however, the conditions for the move were important – namely, that it would be a secure tenancy and in a place where there should be some opportunities for employment and education. Gloria who went to visit a flat she was advised to take by social services, found that life in this village would be too hard. At the time, she told me:

I find that with a heart or not...you need to have no heart to send somebody over there. Somebody who is on her own with two children, who has no car in a place where the bus passes only once an hour. If I study or work it is not in the same village, but it is one and a half hour away with a bus that only comes once an hour. If they call me from the nursery because my child is ill and the bus has just left, what will I do? I have to wait for another hour and a half before I arrive. They ask me to leave my life in Stockholm to live under such circumstances? Really, nobody can agree to that.

Several mothers who were offered to move refused to do so because the flats were temporary sublets, in remote areas with no prospects, or the rent was too high. Some also told me of families they knew who had accepted to move, but where the new municipality had refused to pay a rent deemed too high. A refusal to move outside of Metropolitan Stockholm was the most common reason for sanctions among the informants.

## Punishment and coercion

Municipalities in Sweden have the discretionary power to sanction clients whom a caseworker or manager judge as not fulfilling activation requirements by reducing or withdrawing social assistance benefits. Also in relation to sanctions, there are no formal rules or directives about procedures (Thorén 2008). All of the mothers spoke about what they perceived as threats of sanctions and withdrawal of support if they did not fulfil requirements or cooperated with demands laid out by their caseworker. Gloria was sanctioned after saying no to two flats, one of them the one described here above. These are my notes and part of a transcript from when she called me to tell me what happened and from a meeting we had the following day:

Gloria called me and told me that her caseworker called to say that they would end the support with temporary accommodation from Monday. The reason given was that she had said no to two housing offers –one in [name of place 1] and one in [name of place 2]. Gloria’s caseworker explained that it was her manager’s decision and she told Gloria to make an appeal. Gloria told me she was angry and said to the caseworker that she would take her children and sleep in the central station, what other option did she have? The caseworker had told her she must appeal the decision. Gloria said, ‘My caseworker said “I beg you to appeal”. I don’t think she agreed with her manager’s decision’.

Gloria asked me if I knew somebody who could help her with the appeal. I said yes and that I would put her in touch with [name of organisation]. ‘I had not received the information that I could be sanctioned if I refused an offer’. ‘I said no to [name of place 1] because it was so far away’. Gloria told me she went to [name of place 2] in June. ‘I went there to look at a flat I was offered through social services. When I arrived, the one they told me to look at was too small. The landlord told me he thought I was on my own without children. Instead he showed me another flat. It was a nice three-bedroom flat but it cost 13,000. I asked if he could let it to me any cheaper. He said, “12,000, but not less than that”. He said that it would be okay if social services pay, but maybe if I am paying myself it is too expensive. When I came back to Stockholm I spoke to the housing officer. I explained that it was too expensive for me. I’m on my own and when I start working I will not be able to afford it. I don’t even know if they had been in contact with social services there and if they would have agreed to this rent. He said, “Okay fine, if we get another offer we will contact you”. It is hard because I’m on my own with two small children and I don’t know anybody in [name of place 2]

and [name of place 1]. Like recently my daughter had surgery. Who would help me there with my other child? Who would help me if I fell ill? If the children are ill what do I do? In Stockholm I have people who help me out with the children. I look for housing the whole time. I have talked to all the staff in the pre-school, people at the playgroup and mums in the parent support group and *Svenska med baby*. I look at *Blocket*, I talk to people in the street, I have registered everywhere. I found a place once, but I was tricked. Actually, twice. The first time social services said the flat was too expensive and the second time I was tricked. I had to move out again after only three months. I did not get information that if I said no to the offer they would stop paying for the hotel.

They called me on the 30<sup>th</sup> of July and gave me the decision verbally. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July I went to the reception to check if there was a letter from social services, but there was nothing. I'm still waiting for a written decision. They have not asked me for evidence that I'm looking for housing, but I talk to them about it. I look all the time and travel all over Stockholm to visit flats. Only last week I went all the way to [name of place in greater Stockholm] with the children, but nothing... I have been homeless over a year now and I want to look for work, but the children are ill all the time. My son has diarrhoea. My daughter had surgery. Before the surgery I thought it was okay to move out of Stockholm, but now I think differently. I can't see how I would make it without any support. It costs money and takes so much energy to move all the time. It is stressful. I take paracetamol every day now. My head hurts. I would not be able to get through the day without paracetamol?.

Gloria said she did not know they could just decide to sanction her like this. Furthermore, the decision was delivered verbally with only five days' notice. With no written information to look at, it was more difficult for the charity to help with an appeal. The lack of written decisions was a reoccurring theme for all mothers that were sanctioned. The notice time given to leave temporary accommodation was usually only five days, which made it impossible for the mother to appeal the decision on time. Furthermore, it only offered the opportunity for a first appeal to social services, while court appeals can take months to go through, at which point it is already too late.

## Inconsistency and confusion

The discretionary elements of social service working practices were described as confusing and disempowering by my informants. They found it difficult to know what to expect and sometimes they claimed they did not know what was expected from them. Some had also experienced rather drastic changes in how their situation was dealt with. First they had received support from social services, and then suddenly they were told that they were responsible for finding their own housing. Such changes were also brought up by the practitioners that I interviewed. One respondent, who worked within adult education in a municipality where there had been a rapid increase in cases where families with children were denied assistance, told me:

You know, in this municipality decision-making has been very much tied to who is in charge politically. This is very new, at least that is how I see it. You know that people are not getting any help... We have talked about this a lot and think this has something to do with how the Social Service Act is interpreted. This is what has happened. They have decided to interpret the Social Service Act in a very different and much stricter way. If you talk to people who have worked for a long time in this municipality, well, earlier they always said, 'We don't put children on the street'. It was like a mantra – 'We don't do that in this municipality'. But now suddenly they do it.

Mothers who had received long-term assistance, by being placed either in hostel accommodation or in flats with social contracts, were told that they were no longer eligible for assistance. This happened to Judith, who had lived in a hostel with her daughter for almost two years. She was given an ultimatum: either she should take up a one-year lease on a sublet she had never seen in the north of Sweden, or she would have to solve her own housing situation. Judith did not want to move because it was not a permanent solution and it was far away from her and her daughter's support networks. As a consequence, she was sanctioned and refused any further emergency housing assistance. Sara had a similar experience as Judith, and during the time that I followed her situation, she was sanctioned twice for not accepting housing offers made by social services. In the first instance, she was told to move to a sublet in a small village three hours away from Stockholm, and the second time to an accommodation shared with single men in another part of metropolitan Stockholm. Sara explained what happened the first time:

The doctor said social services had to help me. They said I had to apply for flats three hours from Stockholm, but I was scared. I said, 'I can't do it and what about my child? Can you please help me?' They said no. I was scared and couldn't cope. The place in the village was only a temporary contract so I said no. Then social services threw us out from the hostel. Me and my child were travelling around on the tube and we slept in different places. I had to leave my clothes in my teacher's room. It was too much to carry around. Then my teacher booked a hotel for me. She was paying for it. She saw me and my child in [name of area] and that we were upset so she booked the hotel. Then after that social services put me in a hostel again, but they say they will not pay for a flat. I have to look for places on Blocket [an internet site]. They say I have to look by myself, but I can't do it.

Sara said she did not know they could throw her out like this and several mothers made similar reflections – they did not understand the rules. Some of these mothers suffered from trauma induced by violence and were not able to read and write very well in Swedish. One of them had come to Sweden through the UN programme of dispersal for especially vulnerable refugees. None of these circumstances were accounted for in the decision letters from social services that the mothers showed to me. Several mothers described situations where social workers were unable to answer their questions, and where they were given contradictory advice, and how different municipalities or city districts appeared to apply different rules. Gloria was encouraged to look for housing all over Sweden, but told me that her social worker could not give her any information regarding the rent levels that would be approved in other municipalities or if she could get any practical support. In a moment of great frustration, Gloria relayed a conversation she had had with her social worker to me:

'How are you helping people? I would like to know what your laws are...your social service law...who can you help? Who can't you help? I would like to know...and how it works...because today you tell me find a flat that costs 12,000. I find a flat that costs 12,000 and then you say "my manager has not approved". It is like they are playing with people. Like we are toilet paper that you use and then throw away'. She said, 'Oh, if you look in the social service act you can see the rules and all that...'. I said, '...but Laura, it is not like that...because when you work you need to take responsibility for your work...you know what you can and cannot do...but here one day you say find a flat that costs 12,000. One finds a flat that costs 12,000 and you say it cannot be approved...don't you see that you are playing with me? And you have written here that I have to look for 20 houses...at

*Blocket* the flats cost 12,000, 13,000, 14,000 and just to please you I have to write it down. I look, I write it down and I bring it. It is done. I follow the conditions you have put on me, but what kind of conditions is this? You will not accept the flat that costs 15,000. You will not accept the flat that costs 12,000. However, you are happy and you will renew the hotel because I have fill out that...but do you understand that you are not helping me?’

The lack of clarity around rules, expectations and boundaries, created a great deal of frustration among my informants. Furthermore, what was perceived as a lack of consideration for what would happen when a mother was sanctioned and asked to leave a hostel at short notice, was felt as particularly hard. Mothers described moments when they were told that their right to assistance with housing would be withdrawn as extremely difficult and trying. Since it was described as a punishment for non-compliance, they were not able to discuss any alternative solutions, but were left to try to find somewhere to stay with no further support. In some cases, the social services emergency team were notified about the sanction and mothers were banned from applying for needs assistance for shelter for the night. The lack of immediate child safeguarding concerns in these matters is something which was criticised by Stockholm’s social service inspectors in 2017 (Stockholms stad 2017).

## **Appealing social service decisions**

The institutional and political focus on caseload and costs tends to influence social workers in their decision-making when dealing with social assistance in Sweden (Thorén 2008). In recent years, the social assistance cost for temporary accommodation has soared in many municipalities in metropolitan Stockholm and it is likely that this has influenced decision-making within the front-line welfare bureaucracy. Through the narratives of my informants and the documents shared, a working rationale that closely resembles the logic applied to unemployed recipients of social assistance emerges. Social service professionals in Sweden occupy different positions of power vis-à-vis their clients. In their ability to exercise conditionality through techniques of control and sanctions, they are awarded the right to exercise power on behalf of the state. They further have the power of knowledge with regard to social service procedures and language codes. Finally, through entering journal notes they have the power and privilege of interpretation, as it is their version of a situation or a life story which is written down (Billquist 1999). They are the ‘author-

ized tellers of the tale', as they are in charge of the procedures 'for categorizing events which transforms them into facts' (Smith 1995, p. 35).

The Social Service Act grants the right to appeal against any decision to the country administrative court. The claimant has a guaranteed opportunity to appeal within three weeks of having received a decision. However, as pointed out by Panican and Ulmestig, 'in reality, the power imbalance that results from the discretionary powers of social workers makes it hard for social assistance claimants to appeal against decisions' (2016, p. 461). In effect, 'the stronger the discretionary element, the more difficult it is to enforce rights because it is not clear what should count as a violation of them. What should count as a violation becomes itself a discretionary issue' (Molander 2016, p. 50). Furthermore, their position is made even weaker due to the lack of welfare rights organisations in Sweden. However, even in cases where a mother was represented by an advocacy organisation, she was unlikely to win her appeal, especially regarding housing. Maria was one of the practitioners I interviewed and at the time of our meeting she had worked with advocacy in this type of cases for almost five years:

We work a lot with advocacy and we represent individuals in their contacts with social services and other agencies. We try to be a link and help in appeals where we think we can make a difference. We can help to apply, explain decisions and accompany people to meetings. I know that 10-15 years ago, we had a more diverse client group and more older Swedes and it was often enough to make an appeal and then they were like, 'Oh, sorry. It was a mistake' and that was that. It was a lot easier to change decisions if they realised something had gone wrong. Now it is extremely legalistic. Look at these appeals. We have had to act more like solicitors because social services are much harder. They can still make sloppy paper work but when it comes to appeals they make use of their legal team and that is noticeable. Now they rarely admit to any mistakes and just push it to win at any cost. It's really difficult to argue with. They are experts at knowing how to argue in order to win in court. With regard to housing, we can definitely see that they make much stricter judgements. If you look at old court cases from the 1980s and 1990s, you can notice that there was a lot more thinking based on solidarity. Now there is much more focus on individual responsibility. They don't even consider the need for help. That is both within social services and the court system. It has become a lot harder. It's much more difficult to get heard on a higher level. 'She didn't do what she was told and she should have done that'. It is...you know it requires a lot from the individual and there is very little understanding for the wider

circumstances, you know. It is a sad view on human beings. We are going back to this thing that ‘humans are lazy’ fundamentally. The carrot and stick...

Sanctions where temporary housing was terminated within only a few days were particularly difficult for the mothers to appeal against, both because of the time frame and because of the crisis it provoked, where focus had to be on coping and survival from one day to the next. Also in cases where advocates like Maria helped out, the time it took for an appeal to actually get heard in court meant that new emergencies appeared in the meantime. Furthermore, court appeals are only concerned with the legality of a certain decision, while some mothers wanted to make complaints about what they saw as unjust treatment by social services as an institution.

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have discussed the mothers’ views and experiences of seeking help from social services in housing emergencies. When a temporary arrangement came to an end and they were unable to find a new arrangement, they turned to social services. However, as more families are struggling to find housing in greater Stockholm, the question of responsibility has become more contentious. Who should social services help and under what conditions? Following international patterns of increasing social and legal emphasis on individual parental responsibility, mothers appear to be at risk of being blamed for their failure to secure housing for their children. The lack of political and institutional recognition of the underlying structural issues that cause family homelessness opens up a space for unjust and oppressive working practice. In this chapter, I have described how this is translated into different methods and measures aimed at ‘keeping out’ (gatekeeping), ‘control’ (activation measures), ‘punishment’ (sanctions) and ‘exit’ (focus on ‘any’ rather than ‘adequate’ housing). Those measures appear on an ad-hoc basis and in response to demands of case-load reduction and cost-cutting, rather than in the interest of supporting vulnerable women and children in need. For the mothers who are subject to these working methods, they appear confusing, incoherent and punitive. In their experience, rather than ‘moving them closer to employment and housing’, these procedures undermine their efforts, dignity and humanity. Due to the discretionary powers granted to social services through the Social Service Act, resistance in the form of legal challenge becomes difficult, as the determination of what constitutes a viola-

tion also becomes discretionary. In an asymmetric power relation, 'the voice' of those that power is exercised over is easily silenced and ignored by those in a position to 'know better'.

# EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION AND TEMPORARY HOUSING SOLUTIONS

In this chapter, the mothers share their experiences of living in emergency accommodation and of temporary housing solutions offered through social services. In chapter six, I discussed the ‘parallel’ housing market that marginalized single mothers directly, or indirectly, are pushed into due to the lack of more viable alternatives. I further explained how the mothers turned to social services for help when they were unable to find any suitable housing options for their families. The Swedish Social Service Act stipulates that municipalities have a duty to ensure that residents have a ‘reasonable standard of living’. However, how this duty should be fulfilled, or what it entails in terms of a duty to assist, is contested and remains unresolved as housing is primarily seen as an individual responsibility. Initially, most municipalities in the region of Stockholm only offer help with temporary emergency accommodation. In rare cases, more long-term temporary housing solutions are available. Regardless of the legal framework, over the past decade increasing numbers of families have been seeking help. The lack of public emergency shelters catering for families has led to what can be described as a ‘commodification of homeless families’ through the use of private emergency accommodation. Hotels and hostels that are both expensive and of poor quality become ‘sites of rupture’ to family life. This follows a trend which is noticeable across Europe, where more and more families are temporarily housed through such means (Samzelius 2017; Darbeda 2018; Nowick, Bricknell & Harris 2019). Furthermore, from the narrative of my informants other trends emerge, where social workers were actively encouraging, through what was perceived as coercion and threats, the move to shared and substandard housing offered up by what can be described as a new breed of slum landlords.

I will begin this chapter by discussing the notion of ‘reasonable standard of living’ in relation to families with children and what has previously been said about the minimum standards of emergency accommodation. Then, I will describe the growing ‘business of homelessness’ and services offered, directly or indirectly, to social service clients through private businesses. Drawing on the experiences shared by my informants, I will describe life in emergency hostels in the region of Stockholm. I will place emphasis on what life in such shared spaces can be like for a single mother and her children. A lack of private spaces and a fear of violence permeated the narratives shared. In the final section, I will discuss some of the more long-term alternatives on offer, which included so-called social contracts, and in the city of Stockholm, temporary long-term housing through a municipal trust referred to as SHIS (*Stiftelsen Hotellhem i Stockholm*).

## **Reasonable standard of living**

Sweden’s means-tested social assistance scheme is meant to be a last resort when no other income or support is available. However, as I described in chapter seven, an individual only has the right to apply for assistance. There is no guarantee that it will be granted. Central to social services’ administration of social assistance is the duty to ensure that residents within their municipal boundaries have a ‘reasonable standard of living’. Yet, the exact meaning of this phrase is unclear, as there is no concrete definition available (Socialstyrelsen 2012). In a court ruling from 1990, which is seen as a precedent in appeals regarding the right to housing assistance, it is stated that ‘housing of a certain minimum standard’ should be seen as included in the concept of a ‘reasonable standard of living’. It further stipulates that ‘the assessment of how this dwelling should be provided and where it should be located can only be done on an individual basis, taking into consideration the circumstances of the person seeking support and the resources available in each municipality’ (RÅ 1990 ref 119). This leaves it open for municipalities to interpret their duties as they see fit (Samzelius 2017). The experience of all the women in this research, which is also supported by the accounts of professionals, is that the interpretation of ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘self-sufficiency’ in relation to housing, in many social service locations in and around Stockholm leads to long-term inadequate housing situations and even destitution among vulnerable mothers and children.

In chapter seven, I discussed the application of conditionality and sanctions on homeless mothers that have been judged as failing to fulfil ‘house-searching’ conditions. Throughout this research process, I have not been able to find any risk or impact

assessment of the implications of the use of these measures when there are children involved. However, going back to the public inquiry from 2005 that focused on the prevention of evictions involving children, we are able to find an account of the view of the National Board for Health and Welfare (NBHW) which could serve as a guidance in this matter. The Social Service Act stipulates that municipal social welfare boards have an overall responsibility to ensure that children and young people are growing up under ‘safe and good conditions’ within the borders of their municipality. A child perspective in the management of social assistance would, according to the NBHW, involve taking into consideration the housing situation of a child. As far as possible, a move away from a familiar neighbourhood should be avoided. If a move would involve a change of friendship circles and schools, this could result in negative consequences for a child’s well-being and education. The ‘best interest of the child’ might not always determine a final decision, but should always be considered (SOU 2005:88). To this should be added that article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was incorporated into the Swedish national legal framework on 1 January 2020, stipulates that that children and young people should be able to live in a way that helps them reach their full physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social potential. To be able to do so they need to live in adequate housing. Although the parents or caregivers have the primary responsibility to ensure that their needs are provided for, the state parties have a duty to ‘take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing’. This duty should be carried out ‘in accordance with national conditions and within their means’.

In 2014, following a complaint in the municipality of Malmö, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (*IVO*) carried out an inspection and gave their view of what should be constituted as a ‘reasonable standard of living’ in temporary accommodation when children were involved:

- Children should feel safe.
- Children should have access to space for play and socializing, the opportunity to do homework in privacy and be able to rest without being disturbed by others in the accommodation.
- Everybody in the family should have their own bed.
- The family should be able to store and cook food.
- There should be a washroom and toilet of good standard (IVO 2014, p. 1).

The official stances on what should be seen as ‘a reasonable standard of living’ are a stark contrast with the reality that has been describe to me and that I have observed during the course of this research process.

## **The business of homelessness**

If a mother is recognised as being in acute homelessness by social services and deemed to have insufficient resources to solve the situation on her own, she and her children are likely to be placed temporarily in one of the privately run hostels that are situated at the periphery of the city of Stockholm. Sometimes they are also placed in budget hotels or on campsites in and around Stockholm. Placements can last from one night to several years. As described by Gloria in chapter seven, many mothers experienced first having to go to the social services emergency team on a daily basis after being denied support from their local social service office. How this is dealt with is decided on an individual case-by-case basis and there are no official guidelines regulating ‘best practice’. Many of the mothers told me that they had only been booked in for a weekend or one week at a time. If they were still homeless at the end of the term, social services made a new needs assessment which meant that they might have to move to another hostel if the current one had been booked by someone else in the meantime. Although this was a commonly occurring experience among my informants, it is a practice that has been criticised by the Social Service Inspectorate in the city of Stockholm. In an investigation into the case management of homeless families with children, the Inspectors wrote that:

In the material reviewed, more than half of the cases involved many decisions on housing emergency assistance that covered 1-15 days. This resulted in an extensive administrative burden for the social worker and many contacts with the social services for the family. This probably also meant considerable uncertainty and stress for the families. Many of the families in question were far from being in a position to secure housing, and it did not appear that their conditions were likely to change within the few days covered by the aid decision. The audit did not reveal that short decisions are an effective way of working. Of course, as assistance is linked to requirements, it is initially not surprising that short-term decisions are made. At the same time, housing is a basic need, not least with regard to families with children who would benefit from more long-term planning (Stockholms stad 2017, p. 24).

Hostels and hotels where the families in this study were placed cost between 550 SEK and 1,050 SEK per night. That is between 17,050 SEK and 32,550 SEK per month. Unlike the UK, where housing benefits can cover some of the cost of temporary housing, in Sweden it is paid entirely through municipal social service budgets. When the Swedish Tenants Association's (*Hyresgästföreningen*) magazine *Hem & Hyra* wrote about one of the companies that also figured in my informants' narratives, they explained a very profitable set-up. The company was renting ten studio flats from one of Stockholm's public housing companies for 4,000 SEK per month and then let the same flat for 840 SEK per night directly to social services (Samuelsson 2018). The responsible politicians said that they were upset, but that this was a tragic consequence of the housing crisis. Since this investigation was made, the parties ruling the city of Stockholm have changed and the company continues to sell their services to social services across the region. As described in the article, the studio flats were in a bad condition with broken windows, missing cupboards, draughts and wallpaper that had been pulled off the walls. When I visited one of these flats, the mother who then lived there told me that she had had to clean the whole place when she moved in and she showed me rubbish from previous tenants which had just been left on the balcony. This included a broken mirror with pieces of glass scattered on the floor. She also told me about drug users gathering in the communal laundry room and in the court yard late in the evenings.

As I noted earlier, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate concluded that for a temporary accommodation to be considered 'reasonable standard of living', children should feel safe. They should also have access to space for play and socializing. The places that I visited and that mothers told me about were not places where children or mothers felt safe. Far from it. Sometimes, they were banned from certain parts of the hostel, or parents were told off when their children were playing in corridors. Amal shared an incident that took place in a hostel run by a Christian sect:

You know when I asked at the reception if there was any place for children because my children are not used to this kind of situation. They are really stressed and it is boring for them just to watch TV. We can't really go out. It was really, really cold at the time. He said, 'No, there are no toys'. But then my children came to me...they were playing outside in the corridor. They came to me and they said, 'Mum, there are children playing downstairs on the other floor and there is lots of toys'. I said, 'Oh, show me'. And I went with them. It was a big room with lots of books and toys. I felt really angry inside. Why would someone in the reception

say, 'No, we don't have any things for your children' while actually they have it. So I said to my children, 'Go inside and play'. So they went inside and started to play. The Somali woman with her children came in as well and they started to play. She had a headscarf on...and other children...it was big children...maybe 12 and 14 years old... They started to harass the other children...her children and my children. They started to shout, 'We are Christian, we are Christian, you are Muslims...' You know like that. I felt that my children were harassed. My oldest son didn't want to play there any longer. He took his mobile phone and went to the room. I went to the reception. I said to the guy, 'Why did you tell me there was no toys and no place for children?' He said, 'This place belongs to the church. They own it and the women that live there they have the key and they decide. If it is open, you can go in and play, but if it is closed they decide'. I said, 'Oh so this is why they said we are Christian then'. I asked, 'Are Muslims not allowed to play with Christians then?' I said to him, 'I feel that my children have been harassed and that was not a good experience for them'. He didn't answer so I went to my room. I told social services that my children were changed. That they were more aggressive and reacted differently than before. They are young, they need to move...four and six years old... They said to me, 'It is your responsibility to look for housing and it is your responsibility to go outside and find a pre-school and playgrounds.' I started to cry. I cried all day. The situation was not okay.

Hostels in metropolitan Stockholm are often located in old care homes or converted office blocks on industrial trading estates in peripheral areas. If you do not know where they are situated, it is easy to be oblivious of their existence. One hostel that I visited was in a converted office in the middle of a shopping centre in one of the peripheral housing estates constructed during the era of the Million Programme. Another one was situated in an old dilapidated school building. Leila told me that she had stayed for almost one year in a small holiday home on an island outside of Stockholm that she had to take a ferry to. Hanna and Judith told me of privately run 'baby-and-mother' foster homes where they had been placed temporarily by social services. Those were also located in the countryside.

Generally, the whole family, regardless of the number of children, were placed in one room or studio flat. In most cases, the mothers described places where they had to share bathrooms and kitchens with other residents. However, there were also those that were placed in self-contained studio flats in corridors. The places that I visited that had this kind of set-up, were all former sheltered housing for elderly people. Some were still owned by public housing companies, while others were

former publicly owned properties sold to private housing corporations. Regardless of the ownership, they were sublet to private companies that were registered as offering business within the hostel and hotel industry. As a result, they are not subject to formal inspections or regulations governed through the mandate of IVO who are normally tasked with ensuring the quality of social care in Sweden. Although individuals and organisations are able to make complaints to IVO, they are not obliged to investigate all matters brought to their attention.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note that there are no obligations on companies that run shelter provision to offer pastoral care and support, or to ensure that tenants are feeling safe and secure.

## **Private spaces and the fear of violence**

The biggest concern raised by the mothers and also by nurses that did home visits, was that in many hostels children and mothers had to share communal spaces with single individuals who were using drugs and alcohol, who suffered from mental health conditions, or who might be ex-offenders. In my material I have numerous accounts from mothers that told me about fear of violence and about being subject to verbal or physical assaults in hostels where they had been placed by social services. The women in this study turned to social services in desperation, not because of the comfort of having shelter paid for by social services. They knew these places were unsafe, but they did not feel they had any other options. In one place where I visited Sara and her daughter, there was a note on the door asking tenants ‘not to smoke hashish by the entrance’. It was an old care home that was still partly in use and where homeless people were sharing spaces with elderly sick people. Sophia had also transited through this hostel and she related her experiences as follows:

It was many old people. It is not practical to mix children and elderly people. Even my daughter was wondering how we can live here. We had to share the toilet and the showers with the elderly people that lived there. They came with their walking frames to the kitchen to heat their food in the communal microwave.

To access the floor where the hostel was situated you had to take a lift and as you arrived there was a small reception area. When I was there, two men were engaged

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<sup>35</sup> For further information regarding complaints procedures, please see <https://www.ivo.se/om-ivo/other-languages/english/complaints-regarding-social-services/>

in a loud conversation in the reception. According to Sophia, and Yasmin and Sara who had also stayed there, there were men sitting in the reception area most evenings, something which made them and their daughters feel uneasy.

Sophia: At the weekend they didn't sleep. They were there all the time. They were always there in the evening.

Tove: How did you feel about it? About having to pass them?

Sophia: It felt uncomfortable. Especially when we were going to the bathroom because it was far away from the room. When I was in the room it was fine, but going to the kitchen or toilet it felt uncomfortable.

Tove: How many people could sit there?

Sophia: Sometimes there were two there almost all night and sometimes only until midnight. They were usually two or three, but sometimes many. They could be up to eight men. They were sitting there talking loudly, like in a café. I don't know about what. They were Somalis.

Sophia, Yasmin and Sara were not the only ones that told me about men that made them feel unsafe. Darya, who had fled a forced marriage in her country of origin, told me she felt uncomfortable having to share the same space as men who had the same background as her:

They think, why is she on her own? She is a bad woman... That she is on her own without her husband. Like she is a whore. In my country they say that if a woman leaves her husband you can do anything with her.

In one of the hostels, in a different area to the one described by Sophia, Darya was attacked in front of her children by a male resident:

There was a guy who tried to rape me, but I hit him. I managed to push him away and closed the door and called the police. He was drunk and was trying to get in. The children were there and they were scared. They were hiding in the toilets until the police came and arrested him. It wasn't just me, there was another four women he had attacked. There was a trial and he went to prison. He was from Eritrea and didn't know the language. He was new in the country and an asylum seeker. It was him and some other guys that used to sit in the hallway and drink alcohol and they got drunk.

Nora and her children were placed for one week in a converted office block on an industrial trading estate, and she described it as the worst week of her life:

There were homeless, there were junkies, there were people drinking alcohol, they were smoking hashish. I told social services, 'My children have filmed a guy who is not wearing any clothes'. He went after my children to the toilet. He was trying to open the door. My son came and told me, 'Mum, look, look, I have to film him'. When I took the film and showed social services they said, 'Sorry we can't do anything. There is only this hostel'. And one room for the whole family. You know, one child cries and the others start...until now...I will never forget until the day I die. Maybe when I die...

Nora told me her nine-year-old daughter had been so scared that she borrowed her siblings' nappies not to have to go to the toilet. When I asked her if there was any staff in this place, she said:

Yes, there were two members of staff. I filmed them and I showed social services. They were drinking alcohol! They were from Iran. Two brothers from Iran. They worked and lived there. They were eating there, sleeping there – everything! They were smoking inside. It was chaos! My children were really scared. They saw everything there. Then from this hotel we went to [name of place]. It was okay but in the centre they were taking drugs. My children had to wake up really early when it was dark and when they came back from school it was dark. They said we can't go to school. I asked if they could get help with taxi or something, but they said no.

I accompanied Mounia and her two children to a place similar to the one described by Nora on New Year's Eve. She had asked me to come with her to emergency social services, as the contract on her sublet flat had expired and she did not know where to go. Mounia was told that because she had money in her account from her salary she could not get any help, but had to pay for a hostel by herself. She was given a list of hostels by the social worker and we asked if she could tell us which ones were suitable for children. The social worker said she did not know, as she had never been to any of them. Mounia started to call around. Several were full, but in the end she got hold of a woman who said she had a room with bathroom and kitchen in an area south of Stockholm. The hostel was in an old office block, with rooms

in a corridor upstairs and a reception downstairs. A man dressed in shorts and slippers came to meet us and asked Mounia to pay for three nights in advance. He charged her 3,150 SEK and she had hardly any money left for food. The man told us he was the caretaker and had his own room in the hostel. He was Iranian, but had lived across Europe and was able to speak both French and Spanish with Mounia. As we were going upstairs to the room, he told Mounia in Spanish that I should stay behind. She insisted that I should come with her and we went upstairs. The room that Mounia had just paid 3,150 SEK for was a small room with two old metal bunkbeds, a kitchenette and a small bathroom. I remember thinking that they could not have had planning permission to make this conversion.

### **The middle-men**

Social services are directly or indirectly dealing with different ‘middle-men’ when trying to solve both emergency and more long-term housing needs. The majority of the ‘middle-men’ mentioned to me were male, which further accentuated the asymmetric power relations between the women in need of shelter and agents that operate on behalf of social services. These were individuals from different backgrounds who had seen an opportunity to earn money, but without having to offer any pastoral care, support or quality provision. Many staff members in the hostels were also men, as described by the mothers here above. However, during my visits I also encountered some female staff members, especially among the bigger providers. Staff was often from the same language or ethnic backgrounds. One hostel chain had predominantly Latin American staff, others Iranian, Bangladeshi and Somali. White Swedish men also figured as ‘middle-men’. These are notes that I made after meeting up with Yasmin in a café for a catch-up:

Yasmin told me that after the network meeting her social worker had called her and given her the phone number to two men called Fredrik and Göran. They have houses in suburbs around Stockholm where they rent out rooms to families. She called them, but they said they had nothing for her as she has three children. She said she is happy they said no, because she knows people that have lived there and everybody says it is horrible. In one villa in [name of area] there were six households. One family with mum dad and two children, one mother with one child, one mother with three children and three single men. The house was full of mould and one of the children suffered from asthma. One room cost 5,800 SEK. Before we left the café Yasmin gave me Fredrik’s and Göran’s numbers. When I looked

them up, I noticed that they had companies that previously ran asylum reception centres and had had contracts with the Migration Board.

One of the companies had a website and a Facebook page where they were advertising rooms in shared houses at the outskirts of Stockholm. On their website they described how they were helping to alleviate ‘the housing crisis’, by offering rental rooms with a subcontract in shared houses.

I heard similar stories from other mothers, about their social service office having contacts with landlords who were letting rooms in shared houses. Sara introduced me to one of her friends who had been placed in a shared house on an island with her five children. They shared the house with three single men. The rent for two rooms was 11,500 SEK. Just the thought of having to live under such circumstances made Sara anxious and distressed. While Sophia was staying in a hostel, two social workers took her to a house, which was located in a different municipality to the one she currently belonged to, for a viewing. Sophia explained:

There were several families that had come to see it, not just me. They came there from different places. In the basement there was a larger room. I said, ‘I can take this room’. They said, ‘No, this is too big for you. It is for another family – a couple with four children. A mum, dad and four children’. I said to them, ‘But we are many single mothers. We also have girls that are growing, it doesn’t feel safe with men living in the same space’. Then Karin said, ‘This is your only chance, if you live here you can get another flat later’. I said, ‘Fine I can live here for three months, but not longer. If you just want to dump me here, no’.

When I asked Sophia how the families visiting reacted, she said, ‘Oh, one of them was really sad, she was crying. She said, “I can’t live here”’. She was very upset. She lived in the same place as me in [name of place]. She had lived there for five years and now they said she had to leave’. Sophia continued to tell me that four families were expected to live in this house, three mothers with children and one couple with four children. Altogether, they would be five adults and 10 children sharing one kitchen and two bathrooms. They were from different ethnic and religious backgrounds and they spoke different languages.

‘The middle-men’ that were the caretakers or owners of hostels, or flats, were indirectly tasked by social services to ensure that homeless families left their premises if social services decided that they should move out. How this was carried out in

practice, was not recorded anywhere. The majority of the mothers moved out when they were told to, even if it meant having to go to a friend's house or to emergency social services in the evening. However, when Sophia challenged the decision that was made by staying put in a hostel, she was threatened by both a social worker and the 'middle-men'. According to Sophia, she stayed because she did not know where to go with her children. She had been sanctioned, because she had said no to a time-limited sublet in another local authority. She recalls what happened as follows:

At the end of October this year, one of the guys from the hotel came. His name is Khaled. He said, 'You need to get out tomorrow'. I said, 'But I don't know where to go'. He said, 'We don't decide. You need to talk to your social workers'. I was there for one more week and I couldn't get hold of anybody from social services. The second week, Khaled, Reza and another man came to me. They said in an aggressive voice, 'We have not been paid last week. This is the second week so you need to leave'. When they said I had to get out, I said, 'But I don't know where to go. I have nowhere to go'. They left and then a few minutes later they came back. They knocked on the door and when I opened they turned off the electricity so it became all dark. For five minutes we sat in the dark and my children were scared, especially my daughter. After five minutes they came back again and knocked on the door. My daughter said, 'Mama, please don't open'. She was scared. I thought, 'No, I'm not going to show that I'm scared in front of my children' so I opened the door. They turned the electricity on again and said, 'You get the electricity back tonight for your children's sake, but tomorrow you have to get out. You need to sort out your problems with social services'. The next day, Reza and another man came back. He shouted at me, 'If you don't leave the hotel today, I will throw your things out and the police will come. We will throw away your things. I will show you!'

The other 'middle-men' that were described by the mothers were private landlords with flats in rural areas of Sweden who were in contact with social services in municipalities in Stockholm offering housing to homeless people. Those flats were let on either an ongoing or a temporary basis. Gloria was one of the mothers who were offered several flats in remote rural areas of Sweden through social services. As she was willing to consider moving out of Stockholm she went to visit three different places – in *Värmland*, *Dalarna* and *Norrbottnen*. To go there, she first had to pay for the ticket by herself and then wait to be reimbursed by social services. The first

place she said was too small and located in a remote area where there was no school and no work. About the second place she said:

They offered me to go to [name of place] but it was too expensive at 13,000 SEK per month. They said they would pay, but how is that going to work? I want to continue to work, but I will not be able to pay that much. I don't want to continue to have support from social services. They said, 'Oh, but we will pay and you get housing benefit'. I said, 'Really, 13,000 not even with housing benefit can I pay on my own. I have two children and I would have nothing left if I had to pay that much'. So then they said because I had refused this flat, I had to leave the hostel where I was staying.

Gloria's concern about the high rent was not only valid from her point of view, in that it was expensive for a working single mother, but also because there would be no guarantee that the new municipality would accept this rent. In the case review carried out by the Social Service inspectors in Stockholm, it was noted that problems sometimes arose when a client was due to be moved to another district or municipality. This was due to the rent being seen as too high in comparison with the set norm for costs for housing, which meant that the new municipality refused the application. Furthermore, it was pointed out that case law states that assistance cannot be withheld on the basis that a family is unwilling to move to another part of Sweden (Stockholms stad 2017). Yet, nine women in this research, from different municipalities, had experienced threats of sanctions if they did not take up an offer to move. Some had been asked to say yes or no without having seen the flat or knowing anything about the place they were expected to move to. A key concern raised by these mothers was that they knew of people who had encountered problems once they had moved. It was common that the municipality that the family now belonged to offered to continue to pay rent and sustenance for another one to three months, and then the mother was expected to make a new claim with the new municipality.

During 2019, after alarms from small municipalities in the Swedish countryside, Swedish newspapers started to depict what they referred to as 'social dumping' – municipalities in the region of Stockholm that helped poor residents to move to other parts of Sweden. In January 2020, the Minister for Public Administration called representatives from smaller rural municipalities to a meeting and promised to investigate this issue further. Following this meeting, the Government asked the Swedish Agency for Public Management (*Statskontoret*) to define and map how municipi-

palities ‘actively participate in individuals moving to a different municipality, also referred to as “social dumping”’. ‘Active participation’, they say, is when municipalities or other actors actively encourage an individual with significant needs for social services to move to another municipality without informing the receiving municipality. In a statement issued by the Government, the Minister for Public Administration, Lena Micko, said:

I take this seriously. All municipalities have a responsibility for their inhabitants. Through further knowledge, we will be able to remedy this situation. The state and municipalities need to work together to prevent this problem from continuing and growing (Regeringskansliet 2020).

The concerns raised by the mothers in this study thus appear to have received more attention after smaller municipalities complained about what they see as unjust practices. Importantly, it is recognised that this is a problem. However, how it will be addressed is yet to be determined.

## **Municipal alternatives**

As I explained in chapter six, the Swedish housing model that developed from the 1950s and onwards was built on a vision that there should be public housing that was available to all. Housing was distributed through a local housing exchange, but it was also possible for social services to ask for priority access to housing, for example, for single mothers who had been subject to domestic abuse. However, a range of legislative and regulatory changes to the Swedish housing market have led to a growth in the number of people who are unable to secure a tenancy on the regular market. In mainstream academic and political debates, it is often pointed out that the exclusion of low-income groups has been compensated by an increase in so-called social contracts (Grander 2017, 2018). Social contracts are flats (private or publicly owned) that are let to individuals through the municipal social service department. Between 2008 and 2013, the number of social contracts increased from 11,700 to 16,386. That was an increase of about 45 per cent. One of the increasing segments within this form of housing provision was families with children (Boverket 2013). Six years later, in 2019, the National Board of Housing, Building and Planning reported an increase to 26,100, which is another increase by 62 per cent in six years (Boverket 2019). There is a general consensus that this increase is due to the difficulties that more individuals are facing in trying to secure housing.

Social contracts are not a new phenomenon in Sweden, but previously they were mainly used as a tool for housing individuals with mental health problems, substance misuse or debts, with the intention that they would eventually take over the contract if there were no issues or complaints. Social contracts were not originally intended as a way to house families, and it could be questioned if they are appropriate for this purpose (Nordfeldt 2012). These contracts do not offer security of tenancy and can be terminated at the discretion of social services. They are often renewed on a monthly or six-monthly basis. As such, tenants are not protected by Sweden's tenancy legislation. Furthermore, the contracts often contain restrictive clauses, for example, around behaviour and visitors. As experienced by Lama and Yasmin, they can also enforce cohabiting with other people. In Swedish flats built in the 1960s and 1970s, there is sometimes a room adjoined to the flat with a separate entrance and toilet. The original intention was for tenants to be able to let one room to another individual, for example, a student. However, several mothers had lived in such rooms with their children, sometimes without access to a kitchen. Lama and Yasmin were placed in flats like that by social services. Lama was sharing her flat with another mother with two children, while Yasmin shared with a single woman who suffered from psychosocial problems. Lama told me:

Two families, it's only two bedrooms, one bathroom, one kitchen, two toilets and I'm very shocked and that time I told them, 'I don't like to live with another person, another family maybe sometimes is very difficult'. We can't adjust, we don't like to stay with another family but they forced us. They said, 'No, you have to take it. If you won't take it we'll not give you any further opportunity, you must take it'.

Lama was complaining about the other woman who had two younger children that were running around, while her teenagers were trying to study.

Yasmin, Helen and Sara had all lived in flats with a social contract, but had been notified of their termination after one to three years. They did not fully understand why and complained that the reason given was just that the contract would not be renewed. As this had happened before, they had still been hoping that it might be renewed again, but eventually they were all threatened with evictions and notifications to the Enforcement Agency, which is responsible for the execution of evictions in Sweden. Helen told me that her contract had ended two weeks prior to her daughter's college graduation. She had asked for just a few more weeks, but was told no.

She still stayed in the flat and told me how one day two social workers came and knocked on her door, but she did not open. Helen and her children moved temporarily to a friend after her daughter had graduated. Yasmin was still on maternity leave with a tiny baby and had just separated from her husband when she was told that she had to leave the flat. When they asked for assistance they were told that housing was their 'individual responsibility'. Yasmin and Sara were moved to hostels, while Helen was refused any assistance as she was working, despite having a disabled child.

Nora and Darya had also lived in flats provided through social contracts. Darya was still living in a small one-bedroom flat with her two sons and had been told that she could stay there for four years. She said it was small, but good because it was close to her children's school and it had allowed her the stability to be able to work. Nora's experiences with social contracts were less positive, and she describes how she first was placed in a house with her children:

One day they called me and said they were going to help me, 'We found a place for you'. I was so happy. They came and picked me up and took me to a house. I was so happy, but then I entered and it was difficult to breathe. It was full of mould. I stayed there for three months. The doctor came to visit for the baby and asked, 'Do you live here?' She wrote a paper and sent to social services. She said, 'You have to take your children and leave this place. The children cannot stay here'.

From the house they were moved to a studio flat, which they were also subletting from social services.

From the start when we lived there, they were just fighting. The baby woke up and was screaming, the others couldn't sleep. Then my son started to disappear. Two days. Five days. Six days. I didn't know where he was.

Most flats that are let as social contracts are flats in the normal public or private housing stock. However, the city of Stockholm has its own social housing stock which is managed by the City Council. The Council-owned foundation, SHIS, was established in 1963 to offer housing for people who for different reasons were unable to rent on the regular market. In 1996, the Stockholm city council agreed that:

The purpose of the foundation is, in collaboration with Stockholm's committees with social service responsibilities, to provide halfway housing for people who,

for social and / or financial reasons, are in need of temporary housing, and to provide a more durable housing with certain housing support for people with social problems and to conduct other support services to this purpose. For the fulfilment of this housing social assignment, the foundation rents and owns suitable properties (SHIS bostäder 2020).

Traditionally, the main target groups for SHIS have been single individuals, but in recent years the service for families has increased. Nevertheless, as SHIS has become the main facility for the city to allocate housing to newly arrived refugees, there appears to be a risk that other families in need are put lower down the list of those prioritized. Furthermore, social workers have pointed at other problems with the service and do not refer homeless families on a routine basis. In interviews made by the Social Service Inspector, concerns were raised regarding the terms and conditions for tenancies and regarding the fact that high rents lock tenants into poverty. The support offered through SHIS was not seen as enough. The report does not clarify in more detail what these issues were (Stockholms stad 2017). However, the experiences of my informants can shed some light on the issues raised by social workers.

Only individuals that are residents within the city of Stockholm are eligible for SHIS. Nine of my informants were registered in one of the city's 14 districts at some point during the research. They all knew of SHIS, but were not sure of the eligibility criteria. Gloria told me that she had asked and that the answer from her social worker was that she was not eligible. Only Hanna was eventually, after four years of moving around between hostels and other temporary solutions with her children, offered a flat through SHIS. From my notes:

One morning during the summer holidays, I get a text message from Hanna: 'I have a flat. I move on Thursday', it says. I respond and say 'Congratulations' and that I will come and visit soon. Hanna has, after four years of homelessness, finally got a flat. Social services have recommended her as a tenant to the local authority run social housing company.

I decide to visit Hanna the same day as she has moved into her new home situated in a neighbourhood at the end of the tube line at the outskirts of Stockholm. I drive past redbrick flats, typical of the 1980s building style in Sweden and more recently built terrace houses in neat rows. It is a nice neighbourhood, but the address Hanna has given me is rather hard to find. I end up on small industrial estate

and my GPS is indicating that I should drive through it. On the other side, I see a newly constructed playground filled with black children playing football, cycling and climbing. Behind the playground is a five-story block of flats. I have arrived. Hanna's flat is a roomy one-bedroom flat on the ground floor. It is empty apart from two mattresses on the bedroom floor, which she has borrowed from a friend. We sit down on the mattresses and drink tea. Hanna's children are excited and run around in the empty space, opening cupboards and doors. 'This is my home', her 4-year-old son declares to me.

Hanna was extremely happy, as she would finally have some peace and routines for the children. She was living on her own with her two children. They had their own toilet, bathroom and kitchen. Friends could come and visit. However, the rent was high – 11,500 SEK and she could only receive 4,500 SEK in housing benefit. Many of the rents in SHIS are not affordable or adjusted to the income of its social tenants. Instead, they follow the same rates as flats on the regular market. In other words, people who are not accepted elsewhere because of low incomes are still paying the same rents as decided through the Swedish system of *brukvärdeshyra*<sup>36</sup>, but are only allowed to live in temporary 'category' housing (being officially categorized as a homeless family). Another worry that Hanna had was that some of the other mothers in the house had told her that on the other side of the green there were buildings housing addicts and men with mental health problems. In Sweden, public debates about social housing are infected and those that are against it tend to argue that it is stigmatizing. However, rarely is the Swedish implementation of so-called category housing, discussed as a form of social housing that is contributing to the exacerbation of poverty as well as ethnic and spatial segregation for families with children.<sup>37</sup> The offer of additional support to search for housing also seemed to be minimal and not accessible. Hanna was attending mandatory courses in an adult education centre eight hours per day and was usually away from home for 8-10 hours in the day and staff was only at the premises during office hours.

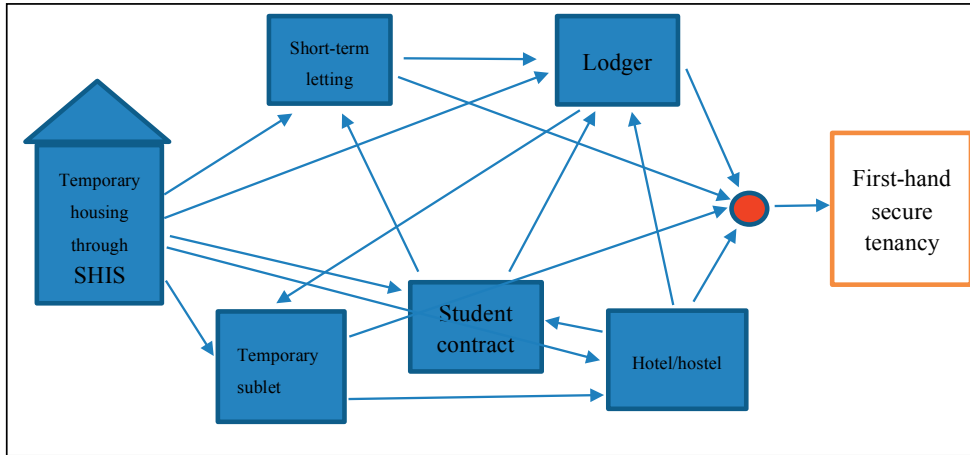
Tenants in SHIS are sometimes offered 'house-searching' workshops similar to those described by informants in chapter seven. Figure 2 is a replication of an illus-

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<sup>36</sup> For more information on the Swedish rental system, see Grander (2018).

<sup>37</sup> 'Category housing' is usually discussed in relation to people with social-psychological problems, addiction, elderly or young adults in Sweden. Less focus has been put on this type of housing solutions for families with children. In a public inquiry into the housing situation for young adults, this form of housing was criticised as it was only a temporary solution (see SOU 2007:14). For an in-depth discussion of the history and development of category housing, see Ingrid Sahlin's (1996) doctoral dissertation.

tration from a power point presentation showed to tenants in SHIS. It illustrates ‘the road from SHIS to a first-hand contract’, acknowledging that there are no straight ‘housing paths’ from temporary housing to secure housing. Instead, families are explicitly expected to re-enter the ‘parallel’ housing market that I discussed in chapter six. They are further actively encouraged to look for housing in other parts of Sweden and are told that it is their responsibility to solve their housing problems.



**Figure 2: Housing paths**

## Concluding comments

In this chapter, I have conveyed my informants’ experiences of emergency accommodation and temporary housing offered through social services. I started by discussing the concept of ‘reasonable standard of living’ and what has previously been said about this with regard to children. Thereafter, I discussed how the experiences shared by the informants were largely contrary to what is stated in official documents. Emergency accommodation in the region of Stockholm is bought from private providers and registered as hostels or hotels and is therefore not liable for inspections. These spaces become ‘sites of rupture’ to family life and are often experienced as frightening. Communal spaces were shared with single men (and some women) who sometimes had problems with addiction or mental health. The mothers told me that complaints made to social services about these

places were often met with indifference or comments that there was nothing that could be done. As homeless families become 'commodified', a new market with private hostels, shared houses, and, 'slum landlords' in rural areas of Sweden is emerging. Intentionally, or unintentionally, social services become complicit in outsourcing business to these operations without ensuring that they meet any quality standards that should be expected when housing children. Finally, the long-term alternatives offered by the municipalities also tend to be temporary, as the families in questions are categorized as 'structurally' rather than 'socially' homeless. There are thus no clear trajectories aimed at 're-housing' families from temporary to more permanent solutions.

# MOTHERHOOD UNDER PRESSURE

This chapter will introduce the pressures on motherhood that are a consequence of insecure housing arrangements and poverty. I will begin by coming back to the role of ‘social networks’ and how the understanding of this term diverges between how it is used in social work practice in relation to housing and how it is understood by the informants. Thereafter, I will outline the mothers’ views on the importance of ‘caring for’ and ‘caring about’ their children and how this in turn shaped their actions and decisions. This focus will then be contrasted with their experiences of interactions with social services. The informants often felt that social service representatives failed to recognise the efforts they made and the practical constraints they faced when trying to live up to competing demands. The toxic stress brought on by the combination of caregiving responsibilities and precarious income and living arrangements, was unbearable and upsetting. In particular, threats of removal of children and accusations where they were labelled as ‘irresponsible mothers’ were described as hurtful, unfair and anxiety provoking. They often felt ‘at breaking point’ and many described how the situation they were in exacerbated and provoked psycho-somatic health problems and physical exhaustion. This in turn, they felt, had a negative impact on their children and on their ability to be ‘good mothers’. However, rather than being blamed as ‘failing’, they said they needed support with situations in which they felt powerless. This view was supported by the professionals interviewed.

## **Social networks**

As I discussed in previous chapters, social services commonly made references to the mothers’ ‘social networks’ as a solution to their problems and as an assumed

source of support. Mothers often protested and argued that their friends and families did not want to have them and their children living with them on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, as illustrated through the earlier example, where I discussed how assumptions were made about Hanna's 'social network' based on people that she greeted in the council house, what was meant by 'social networks' was not clear. When I first met Hanna, she and her children were sleeping on the floor in the flat of a woman who had noticed them at the council house. However, they actually did not know each other. This woman saw Hanna's desperation and decided to bring her and the children with her home. Temporary set-ups like this one was a common experience among my informants. For example, both Sara and Mounia had turned to women in a mosque who offered them and their children temporary shelter in emergency situations. Professionals that I interviewed also spoke at length about these types of arrangements that they saw as highly unsuitable for children. Hence, the reference made to 'social networks' within this context seems to indicate a 're-familiarization' as well as a 'de-responsibilisation' of the Swedish welfare state. It is also reflective of the focus on case-load reduction and budgets as the primary concern within the administration of social assistance, as I discussed in chapter seven.

In 2018, following the publication of the Save the Children report on family homelessness, a radio documentary focusing on this topic from a child's point of view was aired on the Swedish Radio (Barnministeriet 2018). In this documentary, there is a recording of a conversation between two social workers and a mother who has just been informed that she has been sanctioned for failing to demonstrate that she is making enough effort to solve the housing situation for her and her three children. The recording starts as one of the social workers says that there is no further need for an interpreter since they have already conveyed the most important part of the conversation. The mother speaks Swedish, but is making some language mistakes that appear to be misinterpreted by the social worker:

Social worker 1: You have to think about where you are moving now. We have helped you for a long time. It's finished now.

Mother: Me with three children, I throw out...

Social worker 1: Are you throwing out your children? Then we have to question your parenting capacity!

Mother: You say to me that after Monday I have no place...

Social worker 1: Yes, you have to sort something out by yourself. I'm thinking you can go to...

Mother: I have no place.

Social worker 2: But you have a social network. You know a lot of people here in [name of area].

Social worker 1: Yes, you know lots of people. The children's father then, I'm thinking.

Mother: Yes.

Social worker 1: Yes, the father of the children.

Mother: He has no flat.

Social worker: But the father needs to help out and find a place. The children's father is also responsible. Just as much as you. Not just you. It's not just mum who is responsible. Dad as well. The dad must take responsibility.

Mother: He doesn't help me. I'm seeing the children's welfare team too. He never helps me. I leave at nursery by myself. I pick up by myself. I take care of the children on my own. They know that. The children's team.

Social worker 1: Then I think you will have to move to a friend or something. You have to move to one of your friends. We will not help.

Mother: Me with three children, I move to a friend?

Social worker 1: But you have lived like this a long time.

Mother: You say I have to move to a friend?

Social worker 1: Yes, of course. What else will you do? You have a lot of friends so you will have to ask them.

Mother: Me with three children? Me on my own fine, but not with three children. My friend will not help me!

Social worker 2: Yes, that is why we have helped you, but now it is finished. You have to ask your friends for help.

This excerpt illustrates the processes of 're-familiarization' and 'de-responsibilisation'. Because the mother has been judged to fail, the responsibility is now passed on to her with no further support from social services. If her children are suffering, it is also 'her fault'. She needs to look for help from her friends or her ex-husband. How she solves her children's need for shelter is now her responsibility. A bit later in the conversation, one of the social workers says, 'You are not taking responsibility for your children. That is the problem. You are not taking responsibility for your children...'

From the mothers' perspective, the insistence that they should draw on their 'social networks' to solve their housing problems was deeply problematic. In their experience, most of their friends were not able, or willing, to house them with their

children for any longer period, something which I discussed in previous chapters. As Gloria told me:

Honestly, with children it is hard. When I was on my own it was okay, I could find places to live even stay with friends, but with children...you lose out. Who wants to keep you with children?

This reflection is almost identical to the one made by the mother in the radio programme and similar views were expressed by all of the informants. From the way the notion of 'social networks' was used by social workers in the context of housing, it was also difficult to assess how it was conceptualized and understood. Although social networks and social support are often described as essential and seen as 'additional safety nets' for very low-income families, there is no evidence that this is a solution to homelessness. It is rather the opposite. Doubling up instead tends to contribute to an erosion of social relationships and a reduction of social capital (Skobba & Goetz 2015).

Benjamin Gottlieb and Anne Bergen (2010) have argued that social networks consist of individual ties and have a structural (number, density and interconnectedness of ties) and functional (e.g. instrumental, emotional or informational support) dimension, while social support covers the relational dimension and includes reciprocity. The mother in the excerpt above keeps repeating that her friends will not have her and her three children living with them, while the social workers insist that this is her only option. Among the informants, similar experiences were common and many felt that they were not respected or that their situation was not recognised. When Leila was asked to leave a room she had been renting, she went to social services and asked for help, but did not feel that she was listened to:

You know, although I had explained my situation. When I first got married with my children's father...in the Islamic way...my parents were against it. So I didn't have any contact with my family and relatives and that. That is why I was renting a room. Otherwise I would have stayed with family to start with. But they were just like, well, it should work. They don't have much understanding for those issues.

The lack of social networks or people who were able to offer mothers and children support, was also raised by Emma, one of the adult teachers that I interviewed. She

recalled a confrontation she once had with two social workers about the situation of one of her students:

They just said, 'But we have no housing in this municipality'. 'Okay', I said, 'but you can't just put children on the street'. I was really upset. 'No, but we have referred her to her network', they said. 'But she has no network! Her network is that she is sleeping at somebody's place that she has met in the mosque the same day. Then she asks them if she can come along and sleep at their place. This is not safe for her child at all. She has no idea who she is going home with. She has no network!'

Social support networks can be specified according to the forms of aid that flow through them. Informal supportive and protective networks often play a positive and important role in the lives of single mothers and their children (Dominguez & Watkins 2003; Lumino et al. 2016). The opportunity to build and maintain relationships in which these forms of support can develop is significant for how very low-income single mothers use their agency to 'get by' in everyday life and 'get out' of positions of disadvantage (Lister 2004). When the mothers talked about support and social relationships, it was with the emphasis on their importance for their children and for them in their roles as mothers. The mothers' attachment to greater Stockholm was generally explained by referring to the importance of support and social relationships for themselves and their children. The emphasis was, however, not on their needs as individual women, but on their support needs as mothers and the needs of their children. When Gloria had turned down a flat seven hours from Stockholm in a small village and was sanctioned, she said that it was the lack of consideration for how she and her children would cope without support that 'was hurting her'. Referring to other mothers that she had met through a baby & toddler group she said:

I really feel hurt and shocked. They have become like my family. I have spent a lot of time there with many mums... Every Wednesday we meet up and do things together. They don't have to help me but we have become like family. They do. I have no family here. If I go somewhere else, who will help me there? [...] The time it takes to build relationships, the time it takes to get to know each other. Will they be nice to us? It is really hard. It is hard to move with children, you know.

Gloria told me how the mothers she had met in this group had rallied around her when she was on her own with a toddler and in the late stages of a complicated pregnancy whilst also staying in emergency accommodation. They had helped her with picking up her child from nursery, and taking him to the park, and supported her with other practical issues like shopping and laundry. Socializing generally happened with and through the children, as in Gloria's example with the baby & toddler group. However, this became more difficult when children were older and if the mother was working or engaged in full-time mandatory language or work-related activation programmes.

Another important source of support, often described as sites of instrumental, emotional and informational support, were nurseries and schools. As far as it was possible, mothers tried to keep children in the same settings, to avoid disruption and secure some sense of emotional stability. Darya explains:

I have never changed their school because they have friends and their teachers are very nice. The teacher tried to help me to make my son feel better. She has a very good relationship with Adam. If he was moaning or ashamed of going into the classroom if he was late. She came outside and told him, 'I also lived far away when I was little and sometimes I was late. Look, David he lives close to the school, but yesterday he was late. It's not a problem. We know that you live far away'. The school has meant a lot for the children. This is why I kept them there even when we lived far away. It took a long time. Sometimes we had to wake up at five so that they would be on time. They had to get dressed, eat and all that.

Social support, or networks, thus played a more instrumental or emotional role for the mothers and it was often the needs of the children that were accentuated. In a way, to the women that I had an ongoing contact with, I became part of their network – not so much for instrumental reasons, but as somebody who could give them information, and contacts to people who could offer support, and as a 'friendly listener'. The professionals that I have interviewed also played this role in that they were perceived as having 'power on behalf of' and as 'friendly others'. Kerstin, who in her role as a Swedish teacher met mothers on a daily basis, told me:

I don't know how many papers and letters I see every week. What is this, Kerstin? What does it mean? Text messages and phone calls. It is constant and I think that it would be good to have a small team that could help with this. Like a support team for these people.

## **‘Caring about’ and ‘caring for’**

The practical and emotional needs of the children were at the centre of both actions and thoughts expressed by the mothers in this study. Emphasis was put on the struggle to fulfil their role as mothers, and on the constraints that prevented them from carrying out their ‘motherwork’ in the way they wished for. The children were central in the accounts of their attempts ‘to get by’, which involved everyday practical tasks like ensuring that the children were appropriately cared for, that they were able to go to school, partake and engage in stimulating activities, and that they were physically safe. It also involved ‘emotional labour’, where they were trying to ensure that the children were feeling safe and protected from psychological harm and making attempts to instil hope that one day the situation would change. The children were also their key motivation for attempting to ‘get out’ of poverty and find more stable housing, and the reason why some of the mothers spoke about ‘getting (back) at’ social services by filing complaints or making appeals regarding decisions and treatment that they perceived as unjust. Gloria expressed her indignation and frustration with the situation she was facing as follows:

It is upsetting. It’s like they are doing injustice...I don’t know...I don’t know...  
You tell yourself you don’t even want to live anymore. Then you look at your child and that is what keeps you going, you know.

Darya, who had started to work evening shifts a few months before I met her, also expressed how her children gave her strength:

They have to go to bed by themselves. I fix food and put it on the table. They call me and say, ‘Mum, we are going to bed now. Good night, mum’. They write a note that says, ‘Mum, I love you’. They are usually asleep by 10. It is cold outside but the warmth from the message makes me happy. I can continue...

The mothers recognised that within the extreme pressure and constraints that they were facing, they were not always able to fulfil all the needs that their children had and therefore they asked for help – from social services and from other organisations as well as from family and friends. This, in their view, was a way of ensuring that their children were cared for. Darya spoke at length about her and her children’s need for support as they had no family and had gone through many traumatising experiences.

I want to put it like this. They are my children and I can hold them one hour, two hours, but maybe after 10 hours I'm sinking... I don't know for how long I will be able to cope with this situation. I hope they will be able to get help. That they could have helped me before it was too difficult. For the children's sake. Now it feels really bad because I have to leave them at home alone. I wish they [social services] could help us with a contact family. This would be the best thing for the children.

Darya was also keen for her children to be able to partake in different activities, but said that where she lived it was expensive and social services did not want to help to pay for it.

They say everything is voluntary. Everything is voluntary. Only food is the most important. But you can help a child. It's not I that want it, it is my children's interests. It is to support their development and self-esteem. Especially for my children who have had such a difficult background. It is really important. They count us as a normal family. But if I had no problems, why would I seek help from you?

In chapter three, I raised the questions of 'time poverty' and 'time regulation' as a barrier to participation and inclusion. The 'time to care', or rather the time it takes to ensure that the needs of children are met when a family is living under precarious housing conditions, was of great concern to all of my informants. The words often used by the mothers when they described their situation was that it was 'exhausting', that they were 'tired', that they felt 'stressed' and 'anxious', and that they felt as if nobody cared. The experience was draining – both physically and mentally. This was particularly prominent when they spoke about periods where they had been forced to move frequently between different locations across the region. The difference between parenting alone or as a couple was rarely taken into consideration, something which was also noted by the professionals that I interviewed. Naima, one of the nurses, expressed this as follows:

I would say that the women who are on their own, their health and well-being is worse. We can see that. It is also very difficult for them to carry the whole responsibility on their own. Women who have a partner...you know at least they have someone to talk to, to reason with, someone who can take the children while the other parent is looking for somewhere to live. There are more options. But when you are on your own, you are really vulnerable. It is usually those mums that end up in those hostels.

When I asked her if she thought that social services showed any awareness of these differences, she responded:

In my experience? No, I don't think they see them as individuals with much more difficult and complicated circumstances than others. Unfortunately, we live in the country *lagom*<sup>38</sup>...you can't treat anybody differently. Everybody should be offered the same help and it's like a basic. Then we can't do anything extra, because then it would be unfair... I think that is wrong. I think you need to be able to see individual needs. That you can compare vulnerability. These mums are much more vulnerable than someone with a partner. There are other requirements, you know. She is expected to do the same things as two people that are a couple. I don't think that is reasonable or right.

The mothers raised both practical and emotional issues related to their children that they saw as a consequence of their difficult housing situations. A common issue raised was the distance between temporary housing arrangements and the children's schools or nurseries. Leila, who was placed on an island, outside of central Stockholm, for about one year told me:

One of the criteria to get support financially was that the children had to be enrolled and attend a pre-school. You have no choice, it is mandatory. Although I was on maternity leave, the other two had to go.

The children continued to be registered in a pre-school in the area where they were previously living as lodgers, which was a two-hour journey from their temporary placement. To get there, they had to take a ferry, two busses and the tube. Leila continued by saying that:

When I was placed at [name of island] I was thinking it's not so easy to swap and find a new one. It was their first pre-school and it had been difficult for them to settle, so you know...I used to take them when I went to Stockholm, but it wasn't so often.

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<sup>38</sup> *Lagom* is a Swedish expression which means that something should be neither more nor less, it should be 'just right'. Hence, in this context it refers to the principle of 'sameness' which is characteristic for the Swedish model of universal access to services.

When I asked her if no one was asking about their attendance, she said no. Asma, who moved around between friends and as a lodger, had a similar experience: 'Between November and February I didn't take the children to nursery because I was too ill'. When I asked her if the nursery asked about the children, she answered, 'No, I called them and said I'm ill so I can't leave my children. I'm homeless, I told them. Okay, they said'.

When a family was relocated from one temporary place to another, it was rare that they received any help with their bags and belongings. Social services did not offer help with transport apart from on rare occasions. One of the companies that had four hostels across Stockholm offered a pick-up service where they came and collected Gloria's belongings. However, when she moved out from their hostel, they did not help. Mothers described how they had belongings scattered among friends and how they often just had to leave things behind. The children rarely had any toys or books as they were not able to bring them along. They did not know when they would have to move next time. Sophia described it as follows:

It's like running away from fire all the time. We are here now, then we need to pack our bags and move to a new place. Again and again. The children don't feel safe. The only thing we have is our clothes. After a few months we pack our clothes again and move. It's not a life. My daughter keeps asking me, 'When are we going to have a flat like everybody else. For how long is this going to go on?' It hurts to hear her saying this. She goes to her friends' places, but she can never bring anybody to her home. There is nothing for her to show.

As I described in chapter eight, families often had to move out of lodgings at short notice. Asma had rented a room from a woman whose husband was abroad. Suddenly he came back and shouted at her that she and the children had to leave. She describes the impact it had on her children:

He was shouting at me in front of the children. My daughter, she panicked, she was upset. I can't describe my feelings. She was only three years old. I told him, 'Please give me three days'. He said, 'Okay'. When we were sleeping at night...there were two mattresses and an armchair. I usually slept in the armchair and the children on the floor. My son was scared and he said, 'Mum can I sleep with you'. He was shouting and screaming. I don't know what happened, but he was in panic. So I said, 'Come and sleep with me her on the armchair'. I fell asleep and he fell... He fell... He hurt his teeth. The next day he had fever.

Mothers also spoke to me about trying to protect their children from some of the difficulties by applying different strategies and having set routines. Alice said:

I try to keep the same routines. He has to be in bed by eight o'clock. When we are about to move, I try to wait for when he is with his dad, he is there every other weekend. So when he comes back I have prepared his bed and that, so then he doesn't have to go through all this moving back and forth. You know this thing about feeling safe and secure. He wants to be with me all the time. He wants to sleep in my bed all the time. It is the way he feels safe, because it is new environments for him all the time.

This was common among the younger children. They wanted to be close to their parents and were often co-sleeping. However, those relations changed as children got older. The mothers that had teenagers told me it was difficult. Helen and her daughter were fighting a lot because of the situation, and Yasmin, Nora and Lama also found it challenging. Lama's son stayed outside with friends most of the time and Nora's son had started to spend the night at a friend's place. These boys were still in their early teens, but their mothers were visibly worried that they would get into trouble. Nora said:

He [her son] said something that was not good. He said that, 'When I grow up, I'm going to burn down the council'. He said, 'I will do it'. I said, 'No, that is not good'. 'Do something good with your life'. But I wonder what will happen in Sweden when children are treated like this? What will they become? Will they become criminals? Will they become homeless? Or mafia? You know, what are their options? What will they become? They will not become good.

Mothers with teenagers were especially worried about what their children were exposed to in and around the hostels, as they were not always with them or could keep them locked into their room, which they mostly did with younger children.

## **Practicalities**

To live in hostels meant that many families had to share kitchens and bathrooms with other residents, something which was described as difficult for practical reasons. For a period, Hanna was staying in the same hostel for six months, which she

says was 'better than being homeless', but it was still trying. At the time, Hanna's children were 18 months and three years old. She told me they had sickness bugs all the time and that she thought it had to do with the space.

You know, we are in one room the whole time. We eat in the room, we sleep there. Sometimes if the toilet is occupied they have to use the potty in the same room. Sometimes they push it over and I have no water to clean with in the room. It's chaotic. They clean, but we are too many that use the same toilets and kitchens.

I asked her about the kitchen and she said:

The kitchen is quite big, there are four cookers. But we are too many that have to share. There is always a queue, especially in the evenings. It is a queue to wash up, it is a queue to cook... Sometimes I have to walk back and forth and back to the kitchen and the children have to follow me all the time. Sometimes they run from one place to another. It's hard. The problems with the toilet are in the morning. The children go to bed too late and I have to wake them up at 6 o'clock. The pre-school is far away and the children are tired, but the toilets are occupied and then I get stressed because I also need to be on time for my class in the morning.

All the mothers who had lived in hostels described similar problems. Gloria related it as follows:

There are only two cookers and there is lots of people... You go there and sit and wait...there might be somebody cooking and that might take one or two hours...you go back into your room. If I want to prepare food I need to go back now [in the morning]. Right now there is nobody there. Nobody is there...When you come back at 4 pm there is lots of people in the kitchen and everybody is there. How can you prepare food like that? You might have to wait one or two hours or you get a really small hob...that is too small for a big pot...you can do that, but if you want to, for example, make chicken and rice it will take the time it takes... How many are we? There are how many rooms there? 46 or something like that...and if everybody needs to cook...

Prior to moving to the hostel, Gloria had lived in a hotel for almost two months. This situation was also challenging as there were no cooking facilities at all; instead she

was expected to eat outside or eat food that did not need to be heated, which was both expensive and trying with two small children.

The challenges of potty training when living in a hostel were also raised by several mothers. Sophia told me that in one place where she had stayed ‘the toilets were far away from the room and my son was potty training. Because it was so far away he used to wee himself all the time’. Not to have access to water in the room or close by was also described as difficult by mothers with younger children. Hanna told me that in the hostel where she was staying there were rooms with running water, but they were more expensive.

According to the staff, they say it costs 50 SEK extra [per night]. They said it is social services that need to contact them and that they are only responsible for giving us shelter. They said they can’t do anything else [...] My problem is, you know, if one of the children throws up in the night. Then I have to take him to the toilet and the other child has to come. We have to go in the corridors, someone screams and we disturb the neighbours. It’s not good for the children or the other people that live here.

In chapter eight, I described the overcrowded conditions in which the families lived most of the time. The mothers spoke at length about the restrictions on the children caused by communal living and cramped spaces and how they tried to deal with it as mothers. Sama explained:

Mostly I think it is the children that suffer from this. I as a mother, I can adapt, I’m a grown person, but my child is feeling the difference. My child is always asking me why she can’t bring friends. She asks why we can’t have parties at home. As a mother I always have to try to manoeuvre it and try to explain and help her to adapt to the new situation. That’s how I realise it is affecting her confidence. That she can feel that she is less worthy because she doesn’t have the things that the people in her school have. It’s really difficult. I think generally motherhood is very difficult because you have to become a protector in every situation and put yourself to the side and focus and always put the child first. I used to explain to her that, ‘You know our house is nice, but we have other people living here as well so we cannot take our friends here. But when we move to our own place then we will have a party’. I used to do a lot of activities with her so that she doesn’t get affected, but it takes a lot of time and effort for me as a parent to try to

cover this bit up. It is what the situation brings, but I have to do what I can as a parent to make the situation as good as I can.

For mothers with younger children, it was a challenge to find ways to entertain them and keep them active when they lived in hostels, as there were rarely any adequate indoor or outdoor spaces. Gloria said it was hard to know what to do:

The parents lock their children in the rooms, because when they run around the people that work there tell them off. They say, 'Oh, other people are cooking...it might be dangerous...because of the food the children cannot run around in the corridor like that'. So I ask myself, what should we do? Lock the children in the rooms or what?

How can I make it better for my child? How can I make sure that their needs are met? That they are not affected by the situation? That they go to school and get the foundation that they need to get a better life than me? These were some of the questions that the mother's battled with on a daily basis. Asma told me:

Every time we have a problem my children are crying and crying. Every day I try to force myself to forget what is going on. I cry inside, but I'm happy in front my children. I don't want them to feel my problems or know that I'm sad. I read a book...in Somali...in Swedish...every day I talk to them about a dream...that it will be good one day...[...] I try to make sure my children have a normal life so they are not damaged...I think about their future...

Sara also stressed the importance of trying to uphold a normal life and always making sure that her child went to school. She argued that this was her duty as a mother, but pointed out that there were other things that she felt completely powerless about:

We are always tired. I do my best to bring her to school, but we are always traveling. She is young. She is always tired. She is always very tired in the morning, but it doesn't stop us from going to school. She is a Swedish girl, she was born here. She has to do what everybody else is doing. She is entitled to free education and I can help her when she is feeling low about going to school, but all the other things that they talk about because we are homeless are out of my hands. They have told her, 'Can you not stay with your dad?' But she has no relationship with

her dad. She does not see him. She doesn't even know where he lives. So all these meetings where they are talking to my daughter...it's not fair.

### **'Failed motherhood'?**

The loss of housing and housing emergencies were often seen as confused with the loss or absence of parenting skills, which was felt by the women as an assault on their integrity and a lack of recognition and respect for their core identity as mothers (see also Cosgrove & Flynn 2005; Meadows-Oliver 2003). Many were accused, both verbally and in writing, of being 'irresponsible' and 'neglectful' parents as a direct consequence of their inability to secure housing for their family. Referring to the critical work by the Canadian social work scholar Karen Swift (1995), Stranz and Wiklund have previously suggested that 'there is an obvious risk that the Swedish welfare state plays a contributory role in manufacturing "bad mothers", as it has for decades been inferior in addressing financial vulnerability in the studied population' (2015, p.1238). This comment was made as the authors discovered that within their data set of 900 single mothers in receipt of social assistance, 30 per cent had been referred to the child welfare department of social services although there was no obvious link to problems like substance misuse or serious mental health problems impeding parenthood among the mothers. Among those referred there was an over-representation of foreign-born mothers. Without further research we can only speculate about why this might have been the case, but it does point at the importance of acknowledging the intersection of gender, ethnicity/race and status in referral procedures. Stranz and Wiklund do not mention the impact of homelessness, but according to my informants there is a strong link between inadequate housing and safeguarding notices.

When a child is homeless with their mother, it is common that people outside of social services contact them to raise concerns. This can be health-care workers, teachers or nursery staff. All of the children of the mothers in this study, had at some point been referred to the child welfare teams either by social workers responsible for the administration of social assistance or as a result of safeguarding concerns raised by staff in schools or nurseries due to their insecure housing situation. In effect, sometimes it was the mothers themselves who called the child welfare teams, as they wanted to talk about the suffering of their children and with the hope that they might be able to influence decisions around temporary accommodation. Some families had been in contact with child welfare teams prior to a separation due to

domestic violence, but a majority of the referrals made after the separation were linked to their housing situation in one way or another. The longer a family was homeless and the more desperate the situation became, the more likely it was that child welfare teams started to scrutinize the mother's parenting capacity.

Comments regarding children that risked being taken into care if the mother could not find suitable housing were common in narratives shared with me by mothers. Those comments were generally made by social workers responsible for social assistance or who worked in housing support teams. In case notes and letters shared with me by mothers, references were also made to the mothers' 'parenting capacity' and the possibility that children would be removed if the mother could not find suitable accommodation. In some instances, as in the example below from Judith's case notes, direct references were made to 'children's rights' and their best interest.

The caseworker gives the information that if mum cannot ensure that Julia [name of child] has a roof over her head, then social services will have to protect Julia and ensure that this is provided, as social services have the final responsibility to ensure that children in Sweden grow up in security and safety.

Mum will not be granted temporary accommodation – Mum has to ensure by herself that Julia has a roof over her head and if she is unable to do so then social services can offer mum a placement for Julia in a foster home.

A bit further on, Judith is accused of using her daughter and of not considering 'the best interest of her child'.

Mum is using Julia to put pressure on social services to prolong the temporary accommodation.

Mum is not considering the best interest of the child when she is using the child to put pressure on social services.

These types of accusations were felt as disrespectful and disempowering. When Judith and I looked at these notes together, she said:

There is no mother in the world that would use their child in that way. I just want my child to be able to sleep well at night and have a roof over her head. I just want what is best for her. Nobody can take her away from me – life would not be worth living!

Sophia told me that she had been threatened that her children could be taken several times. This is how she described one of the meetings with two social workers:

When I got there, Lotta [the social worker] started to talk about work. She said that I should think about work instead of going to the Swedish class. I told them, 'I can't talk about this now, because over the phone you said you could take my children. I'm worried and I don't understand why you are suddenly starting to talk about work. I thought I was here to talk about my children'. I told them, 'I'm feeling really anxious, I can't talk about work. I need to understand what is going on first'. I asked her again if they really meant that they would take my children if I could not find anywhere to live. She said, 'Yes, that is what will happen. Otherwise they will sleep in the street or in the woods'. Then I responded, 'If my children sleep in the street they will sleep with me. If they sleep in the woods they sleep with me. They are with me, you can't take them away from me'. I said, 'They stay with me but in two months I will have nowhere to live'. Then she said, 'Housing is your problem and you need to solve it'. I told them, 'I try my best but please stop threatening me that you will take my children every time we have a conversation'. Then the other social worker said, 'This is how it works in Sweden, if you can't find anywhere to live we will take them'. I asked them if there was a law in Sweden that says that if children are homeless they will be taken into care. She said, 'Yes, this is how it is'. Then I said, 'In that case I want to see the law. I want to see it in writing. I want to see where it is'. Then she said, 'No, I will not show you, but this is how it is'.

Some mothers told me about difficult situations in the past. Darya struggled while she was moving continuously between hostels with the children and was prescribed medication to cope. She says:

They said, 'We can take the children to another family. You take a lot of medication and you are not coping'. I said, 'You can't do that because it is your fault that I am not coping. You don't care. Only when a mum can't take care of their child then you want to move them to another family. It's not about me not being able to take care of my children. It is because we are not in a good situation. We ended up in the wrong place. Why can nobody help me? Why do we have to move all the time?' I was like a dead person, now that I think of it...

Many of the informants had children that were under the age of five, and several had been homeless when they gave birth or became homeless shortly after. Both Hanna and Judith had been living as lodgers, but were asked to leave just prior to giving birth. In paperwork from the hospital, I could read that Hanna had gone to social services with her toddler two weeks prior to giving birth, asking for help. She was turned away. The hospital sent a safeguarding notice and when she was released from hospital she was placed in a mother and child foster placement about two hours away from the municipality where she was a resident. Judith had a similar experience.

Only a few weeks after giving birth, Hanna was asked to start attending 'house-searching' school twice a week and apply for 40 flats per week. The round trip to the place she was asked to go to took about four hours on public transport. Hence, although she was on maternity leave she was subject to activation and control measures. In chapter six, I cited a report from the social services emergency team which shows how Hanna had become destitute. That incident happened six months after she gave birth to her second child. Thus, during a time when the mothers were exempted from work-related activities, their housing situation could still mean that they were mandated to demonstrate their 'worthiness' of basic assistance. It also meant that social services could withdraw the assistance if the mothers were seen as not complying.

Five months later, Hanna was sent by social services to a residential assessment unit with her children. She stayed in this closed unit for two months and was assessed with regard to her adequacy as a parent. According to herself, she did not understand where she was sent, but agreed to it because she was told she would lose her children otherwise. In the conclusion from the final assessment, the following was written:

In conversations and in contact with the undersigned, a good formal and emotional stability has emerged, which is a sign that Hanna psychologically has adequate skills to meet and support her children's needs. The observation carried out supports this further. No mental illness has been revealed apart from worries around her and her children's housing situation which sometimes become so overwhelming that it affects her functioning, in particular her sleep. Her worries are, however, considered normal bearing in mind the given situation. With regard to attachment, a good ability is detected and trust in oneself and others is evident. This is confirmed in conversations, tests and observation. A certain tendency to focus on the practical in situations rather than the interpersonal exists, which is evident in

tests and conversation. This is most probably a reflection of the situation in which Hanna has found herself during her time in Sweden, which has been marked by worries around security and stability for herself and the children. However, in the mother-child observation, this does not show. Hanna exhibits emotional sensitivity and security in the interaction with her children.

When Hanna was discharged from the unit, there was no plan and no further support offered. I met her a few weeks later for the first time and she showed me a letter where it was stated that ‘Social services do not judge Hanna as belonging to an “especially vulnerable group”’. Hanna is not judged to have any specific physical or mental illness that prevents her from looking for housing by herself’. The letter started with a standardized phrase declaring that ‘It is every individual’s personal responsibility to organise their housing and it is a parent’s responsibility to ensure housing for their child’. When I later spoke to Hanna about this period of her life, she referred to it as ‘psychological torture’ and said that when she told people about what happened to her, they did not believe something like this could happen in Sweden.

## **A child never suffers alone**

Anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, weight loss, headaches, flashbacks and medicalization were all consequences of the toxic stress that these mothers were subject to over long periods of time. Some showed me notes from doctors stating that their health problems, both physical and mental, were related to, and exacerbated by, their precarious housing situations. Similar notes were written on behalf of children, but to no avail. When I asked Leila if there was something specific she thought was important to bring up, she said:

Well, you know, I didn’t know that it was a normal thing that they could put your children against you. I thought that was really scary. It was what surprised me in any case. Even with my own caseworker. It was always like, ‘Oh, the children can be put in care’. It was always brought up in one way or another. I thought it was horrible. It was getting so bad that I went to see a psychologist. You know, I went to see a psychologist...or a therapist...because I was suffering from anxiety and that...I had sleeping problems because of this situation. This is also the backstory you know. This was the symptoms of what I was going through at that time. So I

always heard from my psychologist who said, 'But I work with people who use drugs and who suffer from addiction and not even their children are removed'. You know what I mean. The requirements are so high, so not even she could understand... Why would somebody who just had some problems finding a job and a home be... Why would their child be removed? It just sounds crazy!

The mental health implications of long-term housing precariousness on mothers was also brought up by the health-care workers as an issue of concern. Camilla recalled one family that she had contact with:

I had a mum with a teenage daughter and a baby. The teenage girl...well, the mum was worried every time she went to and from school. Every day. Because in the same building there are addicts – people who take drugs and drink alcohol. An aroused man and a young teenage girl are not a very good combination. She was worried all the time. She was incredibly downtrodden and anxious. One day she went into the shower and just cut off her beautiful long black hair. I was really shocked when she came to see me. She had a scarf on to cover it, but she took it off and showed me and said, 'Look what I have done'. So she wanted to tell somebody. She did get help from the psychiatric services in the end because she was so poorly. You know, when there is just one room and you are 17 years old and go to college and there is a sibling that is only five months, then the mum is also trying to make the baby quiet so that the older sibling can sleep and go to school. It was a constant...Mum had a bad conscience, she felt like a failure. There was no way this could be dealt with in a good way. She was worried all the time.

Ayomi described how she was feeling as if she was 'going crazy' when she was forced to travel back and forth with bags and children between the school, social services, the job centre and different hostels while also being asked to look 'actively for housing'. Nora told me about a breakdown she had had when her situation was at its worst. She had been in temporary accommodation with her children for two weeks and was told they would not help her anymore.

The social worker said, 'I'm sorry we can't help you anymore. My manager doesn't want to'. Then he said, 'Please come in to the office today'. When I went there he said, 'You know we can't help you with a flat'. He said his manager can't come and see me. So I started to shout. I was shouting, 'It's enough. I can't take it

anymore'. I just felt empty... Then I started to bang my head against the wall. I said, 'Please take me away from here'. I banged my head and then I fainted. They took me to the hospital. Then there was a doctor who asked me, 'Why did you do this?' I said to him, 'Because I can't cope. I have no flat'. He asked me, 'Why don't you have a flat? Why are you not working?' I say, 'Because I have no flat, I have no time to work. How can I?' Then he asked me, 'Why are you pregnant?' He was talking to me loud in a hard way. I said to him, 'I don't want to talk to you'.

Lama and Mounia told me they had heart problems and high blood pressure. Asma became so depressed that she was prescribed anti-depressants and saw a psychologist. Yasmin could not breathe, she lost weight and was sent to hospital, but the doctors said they could not find anything wrong with her. Gloria was taking paracetamol on a daily basis during a period that was particularly difficult. Darya told me she had tried drugs while in a hostel, to self-medicate:

You know, I became dependent on drugs. I have stopped now, but before I also smoked. It was some friends that lived in the same hostel, they said, 'Try to smoke'. It was hashish. They said to me that, 'When you are upset it will help you to feel better'. Once when you are sad you can say no, no, I don't want to. The second time and then the third time maybe you try. For a while you feel better and forget about your problems, but then anything can happen, you can be abused. Not just the mother, but also the children, it will drag the whole family down. It destroys everything. I think it is really important that people get help in time. Medication can never help a person who is already dead inside...

Gloria expressed similar concerns:

I think only that they need to help us. Especially for the children. Then the stress risks making people depressed. If you get depressed it gets worse...and it is easy for it to happen. If you don't sleep and think about lots of things, then there is a risk that people do things that are not good. Honestly, it is only if you are strong and you can keep telling yourself I love my children and I need to get out of this.

## Concluding comments

The experiences shared by the mothers in this chapter, are reflective of findings from international research. The longer a family live under precarious housing conditions and the more they have to move around, the more it affects their mental and physical health (see e.g. Cutts et al. 2011; Meschede 2015; Fauci & Goodman 2019; Bassuk, Hart & Donovan 2020). The processes of ‘re-familiarization’ and ‘de-responsibilisation’ which take place through referring mothers to seek help from their ‘social network’, are not an effective way of countering family homelessness or ensuring that families with children are warranted a ‘reasonable standard of living’. Although the mothers recognised their need for, and the importance of, ‘social networks’ that can offer social support, they did not see their friends or family as able to offer them long-term housing stability. Instead, they saw the instrumental and emotional support needs of their children as central. However, as they were forced to move between different parts of the region and/or rely excessively on family or friends, those relationships were eroded.

The mothers claimed that they turned down offers of housing in other parts of Sweden or in houses shared with several households (including single men) due to a concern for their children’s education and well-being as well as the logistics of everyday life. As single mothers they were concerned about the day-to-day organisation of the logistics of parenting, work and education *as well* as housing. These questions could not be seen as separate from each other. The emphasis on ‘individual responsibility’ within the administration of social assistance, in effect denies the embeddedness of an individual in the wider society and their reliance on it. It is an image of unbound individualism where the mothers’ relation with, and responsibility towards, others are largely ignored. The logic of individual autonomy neglects, and makes invisible, the dependency of children and the feelings of responsibility towards children expressed by parents. Yet, it was the practical and emotional needs of the children that were at the centre of both the actions and the thoughts expressed by the mothers in this study. Key concerns were the struggle to fulfil those needs, the efforts they made ‘to get by’ and the constraints they were facing, which were very much shaped by their precarious housing conditions. When, on top of these day-to-day struggles, their parenting capacity was also under scrutiny by social services, they felt that they were unfairly treated and that their concerns were disregarded and ignored.

# A VICIOUS CIRCLE OF SILENT EXCLUSION

You know, we are mothers, we care a lot about our children. If I was on my own it would be completely different. It is the children that suffer with us and we struggle for their sake, but we feel we can't do any more than we already do.

*Amal, mother of three children*

In this chapter, I will discuss the feelings of powerlessness and injustice expressed by Amal and the other informants in this study within a broader social, economic and political context. I hereby want to draw attention to how the individual mother's experiences, and the latitude of practitioners, are shaped within macro-level processes and contradictions. This does not deny the individual's agency, but rather helps us to understand the broader context that creates barriers that need to be surmounted, at the same time as it puts emphasis on paradoxes and unresolved ethical dilemmas within which individuals are expected to operate. Drawing on the insights from political-economic theories, notably those of Stephen Gill (1995) and Nancy Fraser (2016), I will begin this chapter by discussing how systemic changes unleashed through the intensified globalisation of capital and markets have re-shaped power relationships both on macro- and micro-levels. I will argue that the changes to the Swedish welfare state and the impact on disadvantaged single mothers relayed in this thesis should be understood in relation to these global trends. As the balance between work and welfare has shifted across the globe, it has yet again become difficult for the most disadvantaged single mothers to form autonomous households and

uphold a socially acceptable standard of living, independently of family relationships, also in an advanced welfare state like Sweden.

I will propose that we can, through the lens of social reproduction theory, unpack the uneven impact on different strata within society and also better understand why, despite Sweden's family-friendly social policies, single mothers like those that have partaken in this study are increasingly marginalized. I will further argue that monetary values are emphasised over human needs and dignity, when the stress on work as the only route out of poverty and the focus on 'activation' within the social assistance scheme take precedence over a focus on adequate support. This is also a logic that separates the mothers from their children and that risks moving the blame for the poverty of the child to the individual responsibility of the mother. Finally, I will maintain that by applying systems and logics that exclude the mothers' experiences from our collective understanding, they and their children are silently excluded from the community of people seen as having the right to a life in dignity. 'The problem' temporarily becomes pushed under the surface and feelings of powerlessness set in. Silence, however, means that 'relational wounds' are left open and unhealed and, if this remains unaddressed, eventually the pain caused will infest the whole fabric of society.

### **Social-reproductive contradictions under financialized capitalism**

Through the narratives shared by the mothers in this study, we have been given an insight into what life at the margins of the housing market in Stockholm is like for families that lack the security of a home. The informants claimed that the lack of stability in housing was their main problem, but that it had repercussions for all other areas of their lives. Furthermore, as expressed by Sophia, the children live the mothers' problems through them, and suffer as a consequence. When mothers turned to social services for support, they were often told that it was their 'individual responsibility' to organise a place to live for themselves and their children. This was the case despite a recognition that their housing problems were primarily caused by structural factors through the categorization of these families as 'structurally homeless'. However, in my view, this categorization simplifies how the structural also intersects with the individual and social in complex ways.

Over the past decades, the region of Stockholm has expanded rapidly whilst its economic and political dominance has grown in relation to other parts of Sweden. At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that the metropolitan area has become

more unequal, more segmented, less accessible for newcomers with low incomes and less welcoming for those that are not wealthy or already established. Families on low incomes, migrants and young people are finding it increasingly difficult to secure a place to live, although the city needs workers for its caring and service sectors to function (Länsstyrelsen 2019). The situation in Stockholm follows an international trend, which is noticeable in large cities across the world. Reflecting on the contradiction between urban economic growth and the rise in inequality and housing insecurity, the sociologist David Madden (2020) has argued that ‘the age of advanced urbanization is built on an unstable, crisis-prone underpinning’. In his view, the difficulties facing low-income groups when trying to secure housing are undermining the quality of contemporary urbanization. Madden proposes that social reproduction theory can offer a lens through which we can better comprehend the harms caused by the acceleration of commodification and precariousness in housing.

Contemporary social reproduction theory has primarily been developed by feminist political economists who use it as a concept to highlight how economic production is dependent on processes that maintain and reproduce people, including the provisioning of food, shelter, basic safety and care (see e.g. Picchio 1992; Bezanson 2006; Luxton & Bezanson 2006; Bhattacharya 2017). It also encompasses ‘the development of knowledge, social values and cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective identities’ (Luxton & Bezanos 2006, p. 3). The work of social reproduction is performed in numerous ways and through various institutions in society, including the family, the state, the market and civil society. It can be waged or unwaged, formal or informal and interacts with other spheres of political-economic life in complex ways. A key point, however, is that capitalism cannot exist without the labour of social reproduction. Workers need food, shelter and rest in order to perform at their full capacity. The economy needs human resources to survive and thrive, at the same time as humans do not only have material needs, but also social and psychological. Housing is not a consumer good like any other, as it is also an important site of reproductive labour. Precariousness in housing and homelessness therefore creates ruptures in essential areas of life like parenting, health, education, care and support (Madden 2020). It is also a major driver of entrenched poverty. As argued by the mothers in this study – it affects everything.

At the core of the ‘crisis-prone underpinning’ described by Madden, is what Fraser has defined as ‘a more or less acute expression of the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism’ (2017, p. 22). What both Madden and Fraser are pointing at is that, under the current financialized capitalist regime, the balance has

shifted in a way that favours the interest of the market and economic growth over the social and psychological needs of human beings. One of the problems arising from this imbalance is that, on a micro-level, families are struggling to find a balance between activities linked to economic production and other areas of life. As housing becomes increasingly commodified and financialized, and when the responsibility is moved from the state to the market, the needs and interests of financiers and investors gain precedence over local social conditions or residential needs and thereby contribute further to the imbalances we are currently witnessing. As highlighted in previous chapters, the combination of rising costs of living for the most disadvantaged (e.g. the cost of private rental housing), changes on the labour market and changes to social protection systems, also means that it has become more difficult to survive on only one income. This underlying contradiction is, furthermore, at the heart of the questions of ‘time poverty’ and ‘the regulation of time’, which I discussed in chapter three, in relation to questions of participation and engagement in research.

Writing from a critical theoretical perspective that also incorporates the role of social reproduction, Gill (1995) has argued that neoliberalism, or financialized capitalism which is the term used by Fraser, has given rise to novel forms of discipline. I suggest that his theorizing can further help us to understand how individual behavioural power and structural power work in tandem. The processes unleashed through what Gill refers to as ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’ take place simultaneously at a macro- and a micro-level. On a macro- or transnational level, the structural power of capital works to impose discipline on public institutions and make governments and municipalities accountable to markets. This in turn has had a profound impact on both local and national governance and the relationship between politics and private investors and businesses that are operating in a global marketplace.

On a micro- or local level, Gill argues that the structural power of capital imposes behavioural power through which individuals are controlled and disciplined. The control and discipline are not necessarily universal or consistent, but they are both bureaucratic and institutionalised in various ways. The emphasis on measurable monetised units, ‘managerialism’ and the focus on individual responsabilisation through activation measures and sanctions within the social assistance scheme, are examples of these trends. Behavioural power is further embedded through what Gill (1995) has referred to as ‘coercive commodification’, which reproduces hierarchies of gender, class and race/ethnicity in how individuals are integrated on the labour and housing markets. Drawing on Gill’s work, Fiona Dukelow and Patricia Kennett have suggested that:

...as social safety nets evolve in more punitive ways, with distinctions in eligibility made between those in (low) paid work and those without work, an emerging opposite effect is the 'lock out' of marginalised individuals from access to decent work, welfare or housing that protects them from destitution (2018, p. 1).

The 'value' allocated to different individuals on the market and the social divisions created thus 'entail hierarchisation and unequal resource allocation', which more often than not results in a 'pecking order of roles and places' (Anthias, 2001, p. 845). Hence, we experience the social-reproductive contradictions in more or less acute ways, depending on where in the order of roles and places we find ourselves. Thus far, these tendencies have received more attention in Anglo-Saxon countries, but my findings suggest that the simultaneous 'lock-out' of marginalized individuals from housing, work and social security that protect them from destitution is also an emerging problem within the Swedish welfare state.

## **Stratification and social reproduction**

Alongside the 'disciplinary neoliberalism' conceptualized by Gill, Fraser (2017) has argued that we are seeing a new form of hegemonic 'progressive neoliberalism', which rests on an imaginary of a liberal-individualistic and gender-egalitarian base where women are seen as equal to men – especially in the sphere of economic production. 'Despite, or perhaps because of, its feminist aura, this conception epitomizes the current form of capitalism's social contradiction, which assumes a new intensity' (Fraser 2017, p. 34). 'Progressive neoliberalism' assumes that all women enjoy the privilege of seeing themselves primarily as individuals in pursuit of individual autonomy and that all women and children have a basic degree of economic security. The 'new intensity' hereby becomes envisioned as a challenge to 'work-life' balance or as a 'life puzzle' where the key task is how to fit different parts together, rather than about coping and surviving on a day-to-day basis. As I discussed more in detail in chapter two, the focus is primarily placed on the challenges facing middle-class dual-earner families, rather than how this 'new intensity' is framing life at the margins of the welfare state. From a single-mother perspective, this conceptualization of current challenges becomes problematic, as it is based on dual-earner/dual-carer norms, and rests on the assumption that everybody has the same ability to resolve social-reproductive contradictions through market-based solutions (see Wennberg 2013).

At first glance, the present focus on an ideal of ‘dual-earner’ and ‘dual-carer’ families, promoted in the name of ‘gender equality’, fits well with family and employment policies championed in Sweden since the early 1970s. Furthermore, the institutionalization of generous family policies and childcare schemes means that in many ways Sweden is better equipped to meet the needs of working families. However, it would be a fallacy to look at the place of such policies without recognising just how radical the shift has been in Sweden – ‘away from the redistributive welfare-nationalist form of the state in a neoliberal direction’ (Gill 1995, p. 417). The discursive emphasis on ‘individual responsibility’ within the Swedish social assistance scheme is one out of many expressions of this direction, and changes to the housing market is another. Looked at in isolation from the broader economic and political changes that have occurred across society simultaneously, the emphasis on an individual’s labour-market participation and ‘self-sufficiency’ might appear uncontroversial. However, this omits the impact of the simultaneous changes to the social security system, education, and labour and housing markets, as well as the extent to which neoliberal frameworks have reshaped the experiences of social assistance claimants and of single mothers with sole caring responsibilities that are working with temporary or part-time contracts.

In Sweden, the intense debate about the introduction of tax deduction on domestic services during the 1990s is illustrative of the different views on how to solve the social reproductive challenges that have come to the fore over the past few decades (see e.g. Bowman & Cole 2014). In an analysis of policy debates surrounding domestic services in Spain and Sweden, Elin Kvist and Elin Peterson (2010) point out that the most common arguments put forward by the proponents of a further state-supported expansion of this sector are focusing on its benefits for gender equality and economic growth. Those that were against saw it as an onslaught on the Swedish welfare model. Nevertheless, the working conditions and precarity of those employed in the sector received less attention from both left- and right-wing commentators. In a way, Kvist and Peterson argue, ‘the paid domestic work of working-class and/or migrant women can be said to be making the limitations, or even the dismantling, of the welfare state less inconvenient for white men and women of the privileged classes’ (p. 200). The following statement made by the female Mayor of the city of Stockholm in a promoted article in an English-language newspaper on the International Women’s Day in 2019, is illustrative of some of the class-based normative assumptions and marginalizing processes embedded in some of the contemporary approaches to gender equality in Sweden:

Stockholm is a good city for women when it comes to the possibility to achieve your goals. It's almost like the American dream but it's the Stockholm dream! You can do so much. You have fantastic possibilities because of the flat hierarchies and lots of the employers are also very open to flexible working. And you have a tax deduction on services like cleaning and home help. Now I think women can combine a career and have quality time with the children because they are not cleaning all the time! (Invest Stockholm 2019)

The image of Stockholm as 'a woman's place' painted in this article, is a reality that exists alongside that of the women that have shared their social experiences in this thesis. The former is obviously a more palatable alternative than the latter, and is promoted as a way of attracting business and wealthy new residents into the city, while problems like those described by the informants in this study are enveloped in silence. The question of domestic services exemplifies how the 'relations between patterns of social reproduction, power, and production are interlinked in complex, hierarchical, and variegated patterns of social relations, social formations, and jurisdictions' (Bakker & Gill 2018, p. 511). When we also bring the insecurity of housing into the mix, we can see how the lines between private/public and paid/unpaid labour start to become blurred. Both Mounia and Asma spoke to me at length about housing arrangements where they had been expected to perform domestic tasks like cleaning, cooking or taking care of laundry, in exchange for, or on top of, paying rent for a room where they could stay with their children. Not only were they unable to find means to form an autonomous household, but they were also forced to enter into exploitative and oppressive relationships in exchange for shelter. Lacking alternatives, they felt obliged to accept these types of arrangements on numerous occasions. Those arrangements were, however, informal and sometimes, but not always, facilitated through ethnic networks or through contacts made on the internet.

In chapter nine, I outlined the practical implications of homelessness as well as implications for the mothers' time to care for their children and engage in activities that would be beneficial to their development. All of the mothers mentioned nurseries and schools as important for their children's development, security and stability. In addition to the practical difficulties associated with living in hostel accommodation far away from their children's learning establishment, some mothers and professionals raised concerns regarding the quality of nursery provision in distressed areas of Stockholm, issues which they linked to what they described as a lack of control of the quality of private nursery providers in these parts of the city. Asma, for example,

raised how there were providers that employed staff based on ethnic and religious backgrounds rather than suitability or qualifications. ‘If they have no education or understanding for pedagogical work, how can they help the children to develop?’ Asma thought this was upsetting and pointed out that it was the children that suffered the consequences and that these were sometimes children who also lived in overcrowded apartments with other families or who moved around, like the families in this study. Asma’s concerns were echoed by Naima, who worked as a paediatric nurse:

It makes me really, really angry. It makes me furious to think that in this type of neighbourhood where they know that there are high levels of deprivation, that they allow poor quality private establishments, especially nurseries. It is the municipality that lets their properties to private enterprises. We need high quality provision here. We notice it through the children’s language development. The children’s language...the level...they don’t get the stimulation. Somehow it has been normalized that children that live in this area, their Swedish language is not very good, but that is just how it is. We have even spoken to nursery staff when we notice that a child is not developing and have been told, ‘Oh, but this is normal for a child in this area’. It has somehow become accepted and expectations are lowered. But this is not normal and where is the pedagogical responsibility? But these are private establishments and these children cost money. More resources cost money and therefore they want no problems. The parents are drawn in because they get nursery staff that can speak the same language, so the focus is on comfort rather than what is good for the children’s development, but these are often families with few resources and they need more support and quality than they are given.

It has been suggested that neoliberalisation has been ‘played out on institutional landscapes in systemically uneven or variegated ways’ (Bakker & Gill 2019, p. 516) and that its process is simultaneously polymorphic and endemically path-dependent in character. In practice this means that we have seen radical systemic, organisational and institutional changes at the same time as they are building on, and forming alongside, existing structures. This, I argue, has served both to stratify our experiences and to create ‘blind spots’ in terms of the understanding of the new challenges facing those that are most disadvantaged within the new social order. This also helps to explain how the reality of ‘family-friendly policies’ in one part of the system can coexist alongside ‘unfriendly family policies’ located in another part of the system;

how the privatization of nursery provision has resulted both in provision with a high standard and in provision with an exceptionally low standard, targeting different groups in society; or how the Swedish housing system continues to be regulated through legislation predating legal changes introduced in the 1990s, offering some forms of protection to those that are already ‘established’, at the same time as other aspects of its functioning have been de-regularised to fit the new market logic. The uneven and stratifying development, referred to by Christophers (2013) as a ‘monstrous hybridity’, acts to reinforce and perpetuate socio-economic inequalities across the board. I suggest that it is within the realms of the contradictions that arise from this uneven development that we need to locate the pressures, as well as the silences, experienced by the participants in this research.

Although paid work is associated with success and emancipation, in fact it is increasingly our ability or means to accumulate capital and wealth that determines our full value on the market and our access to housing and other essential services. The more capital and wealth we have, the more choice, autonomy and protection we are awarded also in the sphere of social reproduction. Neoliberalism, as pointed out by Guy Feldman:

...embraces laissez-faire and promotes the market as an ideal to be championed in all spheres of life, in practice it offers harsh treatment for those at the bottom of the socio-economic order, who do not meet the threshold requirements for being able to be successful market actors (2019, p. 344).

The lower down an individual is in ‘the pecking order’, the more they will feel the impact in their day-to-day lives and the harsher they are treated within the system. In other words, one could argue that it is the repercussions of not qualifying as successful overall actors on the market, rather than only as employees, that are translated into the social experiences shared by the mothers involved in this research. The role played by the social assistance scheme specifically, and social services more broadly, in rectifying ‘failure’, should therefore also be analysed within this wider context.

## **The role of social assistance**

The feeling of not being valued, or not being seen as valuable, was strong among the mothers that I interviewed, as expressed by Yasmin when she said, ‘All they want

for us is to disappear, as they see us as hopeless cases. They don't want us here'. Gloria told me how she felt 'humiliated' and 'dehumanized' by the treatment she had received at the social service office when she presented herself as homeless. Those feelings did not arise in a void. As pointed out by Michel Krumer-Nevo, power relations are often played out 'in the most subtle, minor gestures, in the smallest interactions and day-to-day encounters' (2017, p. 815). Those relationships in turn are also framed within discourses that contribute to the 'Othering' of people in poverty and moralising distinctions made between 'us' and 'them' (Lister 2004).

Following the Swedish fiscal crisis in the 1990s, the pressure on public finances was conflated with a moralising debate framed around 'welfare dependency'. In the early 21st century, the concept of 'outsidership' (*utanförskap*) entered the Swedish political vocabulary. This concept has been described as a Swedish version of the language of 'social exclusion' introduced by New Labour in the UK (see Levitas 2005 or Lister 2004).<sup>39</sup> Importantly, 'the spatial metaphor implied by "outsidership" constructed an image of Swedish society as a defined space that a person either was included in or excluded from' (Davidsson & Petersson 2018, p. 169). The new 'social problem' constituted as 'outsidership' was established and defined with reference to statistics regarding the uptake of different types of benefits, notably social assistance, which hereby became a defining part of 'the problem'. The dichotomous thinking at play also reinforced the binary categorization of people as either 'welfare dependent' or 'working and independent'. The only route out of poverty was work, which would be achieved through activation and the 'individual responsabilisation' of 'passive' welfare recipients. Hereby, unemployment also became re-stigmatized, as had been foreseen by Swedish welfare scholars like Sunesson (1998) and his colleagues. Although the debate about 'outsidership' needs to be understood in a Swedish context where single mothers were always expected to work, this dichotomous imagery was influenced by ideas that travelled across the Atlantic in tandem with the globalisation of neoliberal political economy.

The struggle to define social reality is a crucial element of politics. Within that struggle, particular words and expressions often become pivotal as sites where the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested. Central to the introduction of the language of 'outsidership' and the framing of 'welfare dependency' as a prob-

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<sup>39</sup> In my view, there were, however, some significant differences in terms of the policy approaches implemented with the aim to move individuals from 'welfare to work'. While New Labour introduced incentives in the form of cash benefits designed to support transitions between different forms of income, in Sweden 'resourcing' was pulled back further at the discretion of municipalities that were in charge of the means-tested social assistance scheme.

lem was an ideological critique against the Swedish post-war welfare model. Despite the rather different political and cultural context, many of the dominant discourses that link the receipt of social assistance to ‘welfare dependency’ are heavily influenced by a mixture of Anglo-Saxon rhetoric that conflates ‘economic rationalism’ with ideas about ‘a culture of poverty’ (see Fraser & Gordon 1994; Davidsson 2015). More recent ideas that have been championed by think tanks and politicians in Sweden, such as a benefit cap, are directly sprung out of policies already implemented in the UK, but whose effectiveness remains unproven and questionable (Cooper & Whyte 2017). Instead, they have primarily served to fuel suspicion and mistrust of people constituted as ‘undeserving poor’ (Sahlin 2018).

Whilst in most other countries welfare reforms resulted in systemic changes, in Sweden new ideas and changes were infused into an existing system, notably the social assistance scheme that continues to function through a ‘poor-relief logic’ (Panican & Ulmestig 2015). As I argued in chapter seven, the Swedish Social Service Act is a framework law that allows for considerable discretion on a municipal level. While its original intention was to give social workers more discretionary power and means to support clients, in practice it is a legislative framework whose interpretation is vulnerable to dominant discourses, trends and budget priorities. Another important dilemma is that in Sweden municipalities are in charge of both housing policy and the administration of the means-tested social assistance scheme. Hence, the same municipalities that have failed to plan for the housing needs of low-income residents are also in charge of the ‘ultimate safety net’. When homeless families turn to the social services asking for help, it is their duty to respond, in one way or another. Increasingly, however, as I have discussed throughout this thesis, the response in Sweden’s large cities is to define these families as ‘structurally homeless’, thus creating an uncertainty around their status and right to get support.

As homeless families are excluded from the protection offered through existing legislation, both through their ‘failure’ as actors on a free market and through the social assistance scheme that places emphasis on ‘individual responsibility’, they are firmly wedged between a rock and a hard place. Any options provided are more or less equally unpalatable, as exemplified by Sophia’s situation, in chapter four. This, I argue, is a result of a toxic mix of uneven neoliberal developments that have created parallel systems that fail to connect. On the one hand, rich municipalities in the area of Stockholm have benefitted from the financialization and privatization of property as this is a means of bringing in revenue, while neglecting their legal duty to ensure that all residents have access to adequate housing. On the other hand, ideas

that emphasise 'economic rationality' and 'managerialism', in combination with a discourse about 'welfare dependency', have infiltrated the working methods of the social assistance scheme in such a way that, rather than being an 'ultimate safety net', it might more adequately be described as an administrative unit for welfare-to-work policies. The situation of homeless single mothers and their children does not 'fit' within any of those systems, which together contribute to the 'lock-out' of marginalized groups.

Embedded within a market logic, the social assistance scheme is increasingly a vehicle for imposing behavioural power (see Gill 1995). Although cloaked under the guise of 'social work', I would argue that in practice its position within the current social order leads to a reinforcement of a coercive commodification of social service clients. Through activation measures and the threat of sanctions, social assistance recipients can be coerced into employment and training that meet the needs of the market without necessarily meeting the social and psychological needs of a family. In a similar way, the mothers interviewed told me how they were coerced into accepting housing arrangements that they felt were damaging for their children and caused ruptures to their mothering practices. If they resisted, they were threatened with sanctions, which in some cases were also enforced without any consideration for the consequences for children, as the responsibility was passed on to the mother. Without achieving 'independence' through work that provided sufficient income, the mothers were stripped of any choice or say regarding where or how they and their children should live.

In chapters six and eight, I outlined how, when the state withdrew from the housing market and when municipalities in the region of Stockholm de-prioritized the housing needs of low-income families, a vacuum appeared that has been filled by different privatized market options. Businesses operating on this market are now targeting social services and their clients to solicit 'customers'. Following the working practices of social services when dealing with 'structurally homeless' clients, they offer either 'holding' or 'exit' options. As I described in chapter eight, the 'holding' options in the region of Stockholm tend to be offered by privately run hostels, hotels and campsites. Some have been set up with the sole purpose of offering accommodation to social service clients, whilst others are mixing homeless families with other guests as an additional source of income. These practices have received surprisingly little public or political attention in Sweden and the impact on the families affected has, in my view, not been sufficiently scrutinized. One reason might be that, as argued by Mel Nowick, Katherine Bricknell and Ella Harris, in a paper that explores the hotelification of family homelessness in Dublin: 'The increased role of

hotels as emergency accommodation providers is a stark outcome of neoliberal agendas that do not consider the value of spaces or people beyond the extent to which they can be monetised' (2019, p. 322).

However, as pointed out by Gill (1995), it is not only individuals that feel the impact of the new disciplinary order. As power and resources are increasingly concentrated in urban areas, a 'pecking order of roles and places' has also emerged more strongly between urban and rural municipalities in Sweden. In recent years, the rampant cost of emergency accommodation has become a contentious issue in the region of Stockholm (and other major cities). As municipalities in the Stockholm area are trying to find new ways of solving housing needs, my findings indicate that a new segment of the housing market has developed. 'Slum landlords' buy up run-down properties in areas of Sweden that have suffered from financial decline and depopulation, or villas that are offered as 'shared accommodation'. As I describe in chapter eight, those are then offered to social services in the region of Stockholm as a housing alternative for people who are left with no other choice.

Despite case law that clarifies that a municipality can offer a move to a different municipality as an option, albeit not through force, several of the mothers in this study described situations where they had been sanctioned for refusing to move to another part of Sweden.<sup>40</sup> The measuring of results and success in monetary terms, can arguably serve as an incentive for stronger municipalities to move 'less valuable' residents on to 'less valuable' municipalities and properties within the 'pecking order' of social status and hierarchies. As I outlined in chapter eight, rural municipalities are starting to resist, but the 'hermeneutical marginalization' of the victims of these practices arguably continues to contribute to the silencing and misrecognition of their experiences. I would argue that the unclear status and rights of 'structurally homeless' families, further make it difficult to prove if a move has been forced or if it was voluntary. In many cases, social services also push for the 'cheaper options' sourced by the mother herself, which includes staying with family or

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<sup>40</sup> During the period that this research was undertaken, a single homeless man in Stockholm became the subject of a similar situation. He was sanctioned for refusing to move to a rural area of Sweden without having any information about the place he was sent to. His case reached the media headlines as the cheapest accommodation he could find whilst homeless was as a passenger on a ferry between Stockholm and the island of Åbo. The case was taken to the Justice Ombudsman. In October 2019, the Justice Ombudsman criticised the Stockholm District of Spånga-Tensta that had enforced the move and sanction, stating that this type of coercion was contrary to the intentions of the Social Service Act. The District was also criticised for withholding critical information like details about the housing offered at the same time as they requested a yes or no answer. See: <https://www.hemhyra.se/nyheter/jo-kritiserar-tvangsflytt-av-hemlosa-till-hagfors/>

friends or finding a room or a sublet flat on the ‘parallel housing market’, as I discussed in the empirical chapters. There is no evidence that these are effective methods to counter family homelessness or that this is ‘in the best interest of the child’; rather, it should be seen as a reflection of what I refer to as the ‘de-responsibilisation’ and ‘re-familiarization’ of the welfare state. As the welfare state recedes, individuals are increasingly expected to rely on primary networks or seek other options on ‘the market’. Under those premises, the negative social and psychological impact on individuals is pushed to the back.

### **In the best interest of the child?**

For the mothers in this research, the ‘new intensity’ described by Fraser (2016) was noticeable in rather acute and alarming ways as they were struggling to keep up with competing, and sometimes contradictory, pressures and demands. However, within the binary divide between ‘welfare dependency’ and ‘independence through work’ there is little space for the consideration of the meaning of interdependence between mothers and children. Hence, when mothers tried to talk about the well-being of their children, or how decisions or demands impacted on their role as a mother, caseworkers dealing with social assistance assessments were unable to respond. Either those issues were ignored or the case was referred to the child welfare team. Whilst mothers tried to claim their, and their children’s, right to safety and security, the key role of social service staff working with social assistance is to control who is ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of support, in line with the guiding principles of their specific local political-institutional context. With regard to housing, mothers were commonly told that: ‘It is every individual’s personal responsibility to organise their housing and it is a parent’s responsibility to ensure housing for their child’, as stated in the letter that Hanna shared with me.

This response implies that a ‘minimalist’ view on children’s rights and child poverty is normative within Swedish social services. It is a perspective that focuses on the basic living conditions of children but that is limited to policies directly targeting children and young people, for example, in the areas of education, child care, leisure activities and youth work. This approach risks narrowing down child poverty from being a social problem to being a problem of child rearing and it is an issue identified previously by scholars concerned with family poverty (Reynaert & Roose 2017). Reflecting on the increased child-centred social policy frameworks within the European Union, Lister has pointed out that: ‘While the prioritisation given to children has been welcome, it has in some ways, been at the expense of their par-

ents...Great emphasis is placed on parenting and the responsibilities of parents' (2006, p. 326). In other words, children's rights primarily become framed within the area of 'a politics of recognition', whilst losing sight of 'the politics of redistribution'. When 'child poverty', or more specifically, as in the case of this thesis, 'child homelessness', is narrowed down to a child rearing problem rather than a social and structural problem, indirectly or directly, parents are held solely responsible for the situation in which their children are growing up.

In chapter nine, I presented the pressures felt by the mothers in relation to their children and how they were frequently questioned in their role as parents. This was an experience shared by all the informants, although it appeared to become more intense and problematic the longer they were experiencing housing troubles. Several mothers told me that they had repeatedly been told that if they failed to solve their housing situation, their children could be removed from their care. This type of statements was also frequent in journal notes shared with me by some of the mothers. There seemed to be little consideration of the difficulties faced by these mothers in securing housing on a scarce market whilst also facing discrimination due to having low incomes (or being in receipt of social assistance), being single, and having children, and to language barriers and overt or covert racism. Instead of offering support that took into consideration the needs of children and vulnerable women, solutions that ruptured the mothers' ability to care and nurture their children were common. In its turn, this also had an impact on the capacities available for sustaining social connections. This was described as 'unfair' and counterproductive by the mothers. Several of them expressed that they felt that not all children in Sweden were treated with equal consideration or worth. In an interview with Hanna, she told me, 'You know this thing about children's rights here in Sweden, it only seems to apply to some groups but not to everybody'.

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is incorporated into Swedish legislation since the 1st of January 2020, it is important to recognise that human rights tend to be broad and abstract in nature. This means that they are primarily a form of moral statements that can be used to put pressure on states to take measures or change policies and practice. Yet, if they, as in the case of the CRC in Sweden, become enforceable via courts, this involves a 'substantial transfer of policy-making powers from the political to the legal sphere' (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018, p. 121). This in itself brings a specific set of challenges. In the case of social rights such as the rights to social protection or adequate housing, 'the granting of wide-ranging policy discretion to courts implies judges determining the allocation of

scarce resources in situations where “hard choices” have to be made between a range of needy and/or deserving cases’ (ibid.). In Sweden, this is further complicated as initially decisions are made locally, on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of social workers though within the boundaries of a certain political-institutional context. If a client is unhappy about the decision, they have, at least in theory, the right to appeal to the county court. The appeal process, however, is entirely done in writing without any court hearings or guaranteed legal representation. The process is also long, while the notification of sanctions is often given at very short notice – often only five days – at the discretion of municipal social services. As expressed by several of the advocacy workers that I interviewed, it was their experience that court rulings had become less generous over time. The way that the judiciary interprets the right to social rights appears to have changed with the time and in line with the political moment that we find ourselves in.

To some extent, it could be argued that with regard to social rights, the Swedish Social Service Act suffers from similar problems of abstraction and interpretation. In an early ethical deliberation on the Social Service Act that was introduced in 1982, Ulla Pettersson (1990) pointed out that the introductory statements of the Act spell out both broader political goals and aims directly relevant to practical social work. For example, the goal to promote economic and social security can be addressed through general social policies and serve to guide the work carried out by social services. However, the way we choose to implement such policies, or carry out social work practice advancing this goal, will be determined by our conceptualization and understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty. How the notion of ‘reasonable standard of living’ is interpreted and enacted upon is an example of this ambiguity.

It is, however, important to recognise that social workers also operate in an arena full of contradictions (Swift 1995). This is particularly prominent within the remit of social assistance in Sweden, where social workers are expected to exercise control and ensure that people take ‘individual responsibility’, whilst also taking into consideration ‘the best interest of the child’ in a resource-scarce environment over which they have little control. In this environment, caseworkers are discouraged from what Joan Tronto (2013) has referred to as ‘caring with’ – a process that generates solidarity between those in caring relationships and others that recognise the importance of care. The idea that social work is exercised within a framework that is ‘objective’ and ‘value-neutral’ under these conditions, or indeed at any time, is problematic (see also Krumer-Nevo 2017 or Cummins 2018). The basis on which decisions regarding who is ‘worthy’ of support and who is not, is not a neutral act, and

neither are decisions regarding what is seen as a 'reasonable standard of living' for homeless families.

The discretionary powers granted through the Social Service Act, give municipalities the right to determine the means and methods that they will use to fulfil their task. How this is done is an act of interpretation, and its implementation is controlled through various management structures and decision-making procedures. When a municipality chooses to pay large sums of money for substandard temporary housing rather than focusing on sustainable outcomes that benefit mothers and children, I would argue that they have conceded some of their power to market interests. The application of a 'minimalist' approach to children's rights, further contributes to a discourse that blames parents on an individual basis. How, when and why this happens is determined by the political-institutional context and by the dominant normative framework within which decisions are made. This, I argue, is also why the right of the child to a 'reasonable standard of living' can be interpreted in such different ways by social workers, mothers and other practitioners as displayed in the empirical material presented in this study. They operate within different spheres of logic where the normative frameworks that shape their understanding of where 'the problem' lies diverge.

### **'The problem' of single motherhood**

Over time and in different political eras, 'the problem' of single motherhood has been dealt with by the state through different normative frameworks. In Sweden, as elsewhere, until the development of the post-war welfare state that enabled single women with children to form autonomous households, the 'solution' to 'the problem' was often fostering or adoption while the mother was shamed into silence (Sköld 2006). Gradually, norms have shifted and society's moral attitudes towards single mothers have changed. Yet, despite an ideological 'de-stigmatization' of single motherhood in Sweden, the findings presented in this study suggest that the status of poor single mothers as an anomaly within the capitalist system has never been fully resolved (see Wennberg 2008). As the welfare state recedes, and assets that previously helped to 'resource' poor families are pulled back, these unresolved issues are coming to the fore once more, but in a new disguise, which is not necessarily noticed, felt or fully understood by the majority population. At the same time as 'progressive neoliberalism' gained foothold in Sweden, contributing to an increased emphasis on gender equality as a matter of individual realisation and choice (see e.g.

Fraser 2017; Wennberg 2013), women's poverty was pushed into the gender neutral, but racially charged, realm of 'welfare dependency'. Hereby, I argue, the 'disciplinary' nature of neoliberalism remained uncontested and women's poverty has increasingly become a matter of individual effort and labour-market integration. In what way is this then important for the questions addressed in this thesis?

In the introductory chapter, I pointed out that the situation of single mothers can serve as 'an early warning' for negative impacts when social policy has changed. Their position 'can also be employed as a barometer of the strength or weakness of social rights for women and children' (Hobson 1994, p. 176). In chapter four, I showed how single mothers across the board, both those born in Sweden and those that have arrived from other countries, have seen an increased risk of income poverty over the past 20 years. Furthermore, I outlined how changes to the social protection scheme have meant that single parents working in sectors where temporary and part-time contracts are common struggle to qualify for unemployment insurance schemes that cover basic costs of living. I also explained that, having worked within the confines of the British welfare reforms targeting lone parents, I was puzzled by the lack of attention given to the impact of the application of more punitive forms of welfare conditionality on single-mothered families in Sweden, in particular in cases of family homelessness. The impact of both 'disciplinary' and 'progressive' neoliberalism is evident in both Swedish and British policy contexts, however, and comparing the two can help us illuminate just how adaptable these forces are to already existing systems and organisational structures. This can also help us to comprehend why and how certain issues or groups become more visible/invisible within the 'welfare wars' in given national contexts.

Paralleling the time period of the onset of welfare retrenchment and reforms in Sweden and the UK, a key difference, which appears important in relation to the position of single mothers, was the divergent gender regimes. This has, in my view also played an important role for the understanding of women's poverty more broadly and that of single migrant mothers in particular. While single mothers were already expected to work in Sweden, in the UK the lack of policies that 'resourced' women to work meant that many in effect had been 'abandoned by the state' while destined to live in poverty (Cohen & Samzelius 2020). This also meant that the 'welfare dependency' discourse that seeped into the political language in most welfare states during the 1980s and 1990s, became more strongly associated with single mothers as a group that was stereotyped as 'welfare scroungers'. Because of the different starting points, changes to the welfare system affected a much larger group of one-parent families in the UK than in Sweden. The poverty was more entrenched, at the

same time as a welfare rights movement and other communities of resistance, which SPAN was an example of, had developed organically to contest damaging policies and stereotypes over many years. Furthermore, the welfare reforms in the UK implied a more radical shift in expectations from the state, which warranted a closer scrutiny by academics, feminist activists, interest groups and welfare rights organisations alike.

Other important differences between Sweden and the UK are organisational structures and legal traditions. Income support, which was the social assistance scheme that most single mothers were assigned, was administered through Jobcentre plus, which is the British equivalent of the Public Employment Service. Homelessness, on the other hand, continues to be dealt with through municipal housing offices, while the duties are regulated through the national homelessness legislation. In contrast, in Sweden, as I have discussed at length in this thesis, social assistance is administered through social services and there is no national legislation that defines municipal duties to assist homeless families apart from ensuring that residents have 'a reasonable standard of living', which is also within the remit of social services. Hence, while the 'crisis-prone underpinnings' of advanced urbanization, driven by the financialization, privatization and commodification of housing and other areas of life, are noticeable in both countries, I would argue that the existing organisational and legislative frameworks make the impact on different groups more or less visible. In chapter four, I analysed the current problems with data and categories recording homelessness in Sweden. I have also discussed how much of the detailed knowledge recorded with regard to activation measures and sanctions applied within the social assistance scheme is hidden in individual case notes without any reporting duty to a centralized body. Without making an effort to talk to people concerned, either those who work in the field or those who are affected, or to look at individual case files, the problems presented in this thesis are not visible through any easily accessible data. Furthermore, the discretionary legislative framework makes appeals open to interpretations that can be influenced both by dominant discourses and by changing views on the balance between principles of solidarity and individualism.

In addition to the historical, legislative and organisational structures that are obscuring the lived reality of those affected, I argue that a combination of a 'poverty stigma', racial prejudice and stereotypes, and the individual barriers and backgrounds of those that are most disadvantaged in Swedish society, contribute to the silences with which the suffering and harm described by the participants in this study are treated. As pointed out by Linda, one of the advocacy workers that I inter-

viewed, 'the most vulnerable are an invisible group that are struggling to get heard generally'. Yasmin echoed this assertion by saying that 'Our problems become isolated and the general public don't know what is going on'. She also pointed at problems like language barriers and a lack of social capital. Furthermore, in recent years, debates about immigration and integration have been increasingly focused on economic contributions and employment in ways that have contributed to stereotypes where 'immigrants' as a group are construed as 'undeserving poor' and 'welfare scroungers'. However, as suggested by Elias and Scotson (1984), to put all emphasis on the racial/ethnic and cultural background of those that are slotted in a position as 'outsiders', constitutes an 'ideological avoidance action' as it omits the power relations at play. In my view, it also puts up blinkers so that it becomes more difficult to connect the situation facing individuals with a migrant background to wider political-economic changes and thus serves to reinforce ideas that put emphasis on 'individual deficiencies' and 'individual responsibility'.

### **A vicious circle of 'silent exclusion'**

Strong feelings of powerlessness were conveyed by all informants in this study, mothers and practitioners alike. Although, most of the time, these feelings did not prevent them from using their agency and initiative, there were times that the powerlessness turned into despair and breakdowns. Many described feelings of being trapped. Nora expressed this sentiment as follows:

I don't know how to explain it, but it's like every time I pick myself up, I fall down again. I have to start at zero again. I always try to move forward, but they will not help me. I try to find the path, but nothing is working.

The feeling of being trapped was reinforced by feelings of not being heard or listened to. Analysing the empirical data gathered in this study in relation to the wider political, economic and social context, as I have done in this chapter, the experiences expressed from below are very much at odds with the policies implemented from above. The tensions created through the contradictions that arise were most acutely felt in the meetings that take place in the confines of the social service office, but as I have summarized thus far in this chapter, their origins are found in numerous and fluctuating circumstances located at micro-, meso- and macro-levels.

The contradictions that shape the experiences of the mothers are also forming the organisational structures of social services. However, the messy and uneven rela-

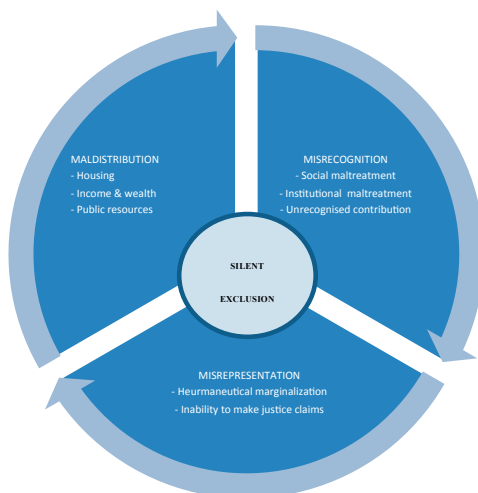
tions between patterns of social reproduction, power and production that shape the experience of poverty and homelessness described by the informants makes it impossible to locate one source that causes their destitution and distress. Rather it is chains of events and relations that reinforce themselves and that allow access to, or removal of, resources necessary to maintain an autonomous household in which family life can be nurtured. This messiness becomes a challenge to social policy and practice that rely heavily on the ability to quantify, categorize and put social problems into neat boxes perceived as objective and neutral. Simply put, the social experiences shared by the mothers in this research do not fit neatly within existing systems or methods used to measure, describe or understand homelessness and poverty in Sweden. Consequently, existing structures and systems fail to respond to, or indeed even acknowledge, the suffering and injustice described and felt by those affected.

Combined with the organisational and legislative challenges described earlier, the mismatch of experiences and common frameworks of understanding has laid the foundation for what I shall refer to as ‘a vicious circle of silent exclusion’. The silent exclusion should be understood as a process that is played out simultaneously within different spaces and places in the social order, where access to necessary resources are withdrawn or denied.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the poverty and housing troubles experienced by marginalized single migrant mothers need to be understood within, and integrated, into wider contemporary political and theoretical debates, notably those concerned with social injustice and questions of redistribution, recognition and representation. In chapter two, I discussed how the politics of representation is closely linked with the politics of poverty. If, as I argue, the social experience of single migrant mothers and children suffering from poverty and homelessness is ‘hermeneutically marginalized’ and excluded from Sweden’s ‘collective understanding’ of issues that need to be addressed through welfare policy, the risk of misrepresentation, misrecognition and maldistribution becomes acute in the ways described in previous chapters.

Drawing on the terminology used by Fraser (2009) in her theorization, figure 3 summarizes the key issues identified through the empirical data that become central to processes that lead to a ‘vicious circle of silent exclusion’. I suggest that the silent exclusion is a result of unjust social and institutional arrangements, at the same time as it serve to reinforce and perpetuate existing inequalities. The different domains are not separate from each other, but are interconnected. Any attempt to untangle

‘the problem’ or address its consequences needs to take all of those dimensions into account. These families are denied participatory parity, not only because they are unable to secure housing, but also because of processes that treat them as ‘Other’ and through the acts of silence that condone social and institutional maltreatment, whilst denying access to membership in the community of people able to make claims for justice, redistribution and respect.



**Figure 3: The vicious circle of silent exclusion**

## A crisis of the heart

The misrecognition and misrepresentation that are intertwined with the maldistribution of resources necessary to cope and survive, and the process of silent exclusion that this gives rise to, contribute to what I shall refer to as a ‘crisis of the heart’. It is an ethical and caring crisis which works itself into the character of individuals that meet in social work settings. However, it will have a different impact on us depending on whether the individual has ‘power over’, or ‘power on behalf of’, or if they are the ones ‘being done to’.

When social workers have to deal with the structural outcome of a dysfunctional housing market without any means to address the root cause of distressing situations, their possibility to act in accordance with the ethical standards of social work practice is at risk of being compromised. As emerges from the empirical material in

this study, this in turn, often has a negative impact on relationships between social workers and clients. In her work on the role of incentives (which can be extended to other forms of social control), Ruth Grant has considered the impact that asymmetric power relations can have on the 'character' of all parties involved:

Power relationships can have an impact on the character of all of the individuals involved in any particular interaction: both those who are engaged in making an offer, persuading, or threatening force and those who are responding to offers, arguments or threats (2012, p. 52).

When Gloria described to me how she was told that she should move to a small flat in a village seven hours from Stockholm, where there was limited public transport, and where there were no schools and no work opportunities she said, 'How can someone with a heart expect me to go and live there with my children? How are they expecting me to cope under these circumstances?' At the centre of many of the reflections shared with me was a sense that many of the policies, judgements and demands enacted through meetings with social workers became sources of disempowerment of mothering and motherhood. The informants felt that their vulnerable situations were used against them, and that their children were used in actions and arguments in ways that were disheartening and hurtful to both mothers and children. The lack of recognition of how the mother's situation was interlinked with that of the children was described as incomprehensible.

The personal struggle to provide the motherwork essential for the survival and well-being of children was central in the life stories of the women interviewed. This is illustrated in the quote by Amal at the beginning of this chapter. The mothers way of reasoning was reflective of what feminist scholars like Selma Sevenhuijsen (2003) have referred to as an 'ethics of care'. This implies a construction of moral identities, that is 'inherently a social practice, something which we do and make within human relations and within specific social and political contexts, and the narrative conventions reflected in these' (Sevenhuijsen 2003, p. 56). The informants' moral identity was constructed around their role and responsibility as a mother, but they felt that this identity as well as the responsibilities that it entailed was under threat because of their living circumstances. They also felt that it was in danger, when they received threats that their children could be taken from them. The pressure and 'the crisis' it provoked were thus seen as coming from different directions, but regardless of its source the effect was felt as crippling.

In previous chapters, I spoke at length about the distinction between having ‘power over’, having ‘power on behalf of’ and ‘being done to’ and about how this might influence the different parties involved in a relationship. How this was played out in practice was something that many of the informants in this study reflected upon in our conversations. Sama, one of the mothers, reasoned as follows:

They really need to deal with this differently. It doesn't matter if the mother is right or wrong. It doesn't matter if the mother is good or bad in their books. The concern here is that she is the guardian of a child. If you don't help her, the child will be affected. I don't understand how they can work like this. On the one hand they have given all the responsibility, legally, to the guardian, but, on the other hand, they are not supporting that guardian. The support is too limited [...] I think it is important that they give more time to women especially. They need to see how a woman is...what situation she is exposed to at that given moment. If they take someone in they need to do a real assessment of her life situation, which also means they have to pay more attention to what she says, what she needs, what her situation is saying. They have to be more flexible in their way of working. How can we solve this situation? Without being so square. For that they need more time. They need more compassion and they need to put more of themselves out to help that human being. But this is not how it is. You know they are like in a power position between the authorities and us the citizens. When you are not walking in the shoes of the vulnerable person it is easy for you to take decisions in a rush and just treat it like a case. If you yourself have never been there...they just take it as a job. I think this is wrong, to just take it as a job in that way. You need to think of the human being in front of you – how would you like to be dealt with in this situation?

In this statement, Sama is highlighting the relational and symbolic needs of both social workers and clients. She does not only argue for a recognition of the needs of the mother and her child/ren, but also for social workers to be enabled to recognise and meet the needs of the person sitting in front of them. Darya made a similar reflection when she told me ‘I wish they could walk in my shoes for a moment and understand what it is like’. Both these women were emphasising the relational and psychosocial aspects of the meetings that take place within the boundaries of the social service office. However, within the current remit of social assistance case handling, the emphasis is primarily on material needs and whether or not an applicant is

‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of ‘poor relief’ according to municipal guidelines. There is little space for ‘a heart’ or for the act of ‘caring with’.

Attention has been given to how neoliberalism has framed the working conditions of employees in social services in Sweden in recent years (see e.g. Lauri 2016). Yet, the impact of punitive forms of welfare conditionality on clients has received surprisingly little attention from national bodies in charge of giving advice and guidance to municipal social services, in particular those related to family homelessness. Instead, new boundaries between ‘structural’ and ‘social’ homelessness have been drawn up organically, in order to grapple with a problem that does not fit easily within existing systems and categories. Rather than solving ‘the problem’ (however it is defined or understood), I would argue that this development opens up for what Frost and Hoggett (2008) have referred to as ‘relational wounds’. This is the embodiment of experiences of hurt and loss and the social suffering, which is ‘at the heart of ... the lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful’ (Frost & Hoggett 2008, p. 440). They further point out that ‘social suffering draws attention to the lived experience of inhabiting social structures of oppression: and the pain that arises from this’ (ibid., p. 441).

It is this pain and these ‘relational wounds’ that are foundational to ‘the crisis of the heart’. Although the ‘relational wounds’ created through unjust social arrangements are most acutely felt by those that are constituted as ‘undeserving poor’, they create ripples across the whole fabric of society. Therefore, it should also be in our common interest to look closer at moral justifications for the harsh treatment of mothers and children who fail to become self-sufficient or solve their own housing needs. What does it do to our ‘character’ when we fail to recognise the suffering that is unfolding in our midst? More importantly, what does it say about our society if we fail to act upon the injustice and pain evoked by institutional and social arrangements that do not recognise the full experience of humanity? What is the human and societal cost of our failure?

## **Concluding comments**

In this chapter, I have discussed why I believe it is important to place the social experience of marginalized single mothers within a wider social, political and economic context. Analysing their ‘private troubles’ in relation to ‘public issues’, helps us to understand how individual experiences and agency are shaped by structural forces. I have argued that, when the key measures used to combat poverty focus primarily on

the material side of things, or even more narrowly, on the monetary side, our consideration for the full range of social and psychological resources required for the experience of humanity is left wanting, which contributes to 'a crisis of the heart'. When value and outcomes are primarily measured through statistics and budgets, the suffering of those at the bottom of the 'pecking order' is more readily erased from our consciousness. Furthermore, the 'hermeneutical marginalization' that those at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy are suffering from serves to keep their pain and struggles away from collective understandings of the impact of welfare and housing policies that are shaped within the confines of a normative framework which is primarily aligned with the interests of financialised capitalism. It is then also easier to overlook the fact that unequal power relations produce material effects that reinforce gendered and racialized class positions even where no explicit intentionality around racism and sexism can be identified (Anthias 2001). When the 'poverty paradox' of social work is conflated with a 'poverty blindness' within the Swedish establishment, the single-minded focus on 'individual responsibility' which was so prominent in the interactions between social workers and the mothers in this study, also becomes easier to justify.

I have suggested that if we see the situation of vulnerable single mothers and their children as an early warning of negative impacts when social policy has changed or as a measure of the strength or weakness of social rights for women and children, we should be concerned. Under current circumstances, the emphasis on 'the best interest of the child' in the Social Service Act and the recent incorporation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into the Swedish legislative framework does not, necessarily ensure that children are always given due regard in decision-making procedures. At the same time, current working methods within the social assistance scheme are not 'empowering women' and are not offering adequate income protection. The 'individual responsibility' and the 'activation' of the parent, irrespective of circumstances and constraints, tend to take precedence over the potentially negative impact on the child or indeed the mother. Through the experience shared by the informants, we can see how the pity for the 'helpless child' instead risks being translated into a practice where the child can be removed from its 'failing mother'. In my view, this risk is inherent in a system that focuses on individual deficiencies framed within the confines of binary thinking and market logic, rather than the interdependent child-parent relationship and how this develops within a broader set of circumstances.

# A POLITICS OF THE HEART

The focus of this thesis has been to investigate family homelessness and poverty in Sweden from a single-mother perspective. Its main purpose has been to deepen our understanding of the lived experiences of those that suffer the consequences of family homelessness and poverty and how this interrelates with wider society. Thereby, the thesis has also intended to be politically relevant to the women whose experiences and thoughts are at the centre of the analysis. The chief focus has been on those aspects of life at the margins of the Swedish welfare state that become important from a single-mother perspective. It is within this territory that we can also pinpoint the contradictions and disjunctions between lived reality, policy, principles and intent.

A strong theme that runs like a thread through the thesis is the unmet material, psychological and social needs of mothers and children and the inability of current systems to respond to, and acknowledge, the pain and distress that this causes. In chapter ten, I placed those experiences within a wider social, economic and political context, which put the current emphasis in social policy and social work practice on 'individual failure' and 'individual responsibility' into question. I showed how structural changes in Sweden follow international trends that can be linked to the intensification and globalisation of financialized capitalism and the social reproductive contradictions at its centre. Across advanced welfare states, disadvantaged single mothers are struggling to make ends meet and find ways of maintaining an autonomous household, although this experience also takes localized forms that are shaped by already existing regulatory systems and ways of organising welfare support. The transformation of the Swedish welfare state over the past decades has been profound. However, due to the uneven and polymorphous character of neoliberal devel-

opment, its negative consequences are primarily felt intensely by those at the bottom of the ‘pecking order of roles and places’ in the social hierarchy. It is this, I argue, that has contributed to ‘the vicious circle of silent exclusion’ that is so intensely felt by marginalized single migrant mothers and their children.

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will suggest that there is an urgent need to return to, and (re)consider, ‘fundamental ethical questions about how people in poverty are regarded and treated and about the responsibilities of others towards them’ (Lister 2013, p. 109) within the Swedish welfare state. In doing so, we should also address questions of institutional and individual accountability as well as the legitimacy of certain forms of welfare conditionality, notably the implementation of activation and sanctions targeting homeless families with young children. Here, I argue that the social work profession should take a bigger responsibility in advocating on behalf of the people with whom they work. Part of this should be to challenge and draw attention to unjust policies and practice. The Swedish Social Service Act offers this opportunity within its framework, but whether this is enacted or not will depend on the ethical pathway that we, as a society, decide to walk down.

I will begin this chapter by addressing the need to reintroduce social justice and an ethics of care at the heart of Swedish social work practice, proposing that current practice needs more scrutiny. Thereafter, I will deliberate the implications of the findings and my proposals for future research and policy. Finally, I will end this dissertation by sketching out the foundation for what I shall refer to as ‘a politics of the heart’.

## **Ethics and welfare**

I began this thesis by discussing our ‘need to know’. I also argued that ‘the need *not* to know’ can be as strong, when we are not personally affected by the injustice or genuinely interested in fighting it (Bernasconi 2007). The reasons for ‘the need *not* to know’ can be manifold, but it is often triggered by an avoidance of knowledge that is uncomfortable in some way or that threatens a position of privilege and status. As long as the current social-reproductive contradictions and the unstable underpinnings of the urbanization process and our economic systems are primarily depleting the resources of the powerless, it might be easier for the vast majority to avoid ‘the need to know’ or indeed the moral questions that follow suit. Furthermore, to even start to attempt to understand the forces at play and how they shape people’s lives, we need to accept the messiness of their impact and their polymorphous character. In a world where we are constantly asked to quantify, measure and

prove 'value' through numbers, the reality described by those personally affected by poverty and homelessness might not always be easily understood by those who have never felt or experienced it.

Poverty, according to Paul Spicker (2007), should be seen as a 'composite concept' embracing a range of meanings. Depending on our social status and experiences, our understanding of its meaning might differ. It might also change over time, and in relation to the political-economic context, as I discussed in the previous chapter. However, it is crucial to recognise that it is the concept of poverty that provide the framework within which definitions, measurements and methods used to counter its impact are developed (Lister 2004). Therefore, it also matters through what means and on what basis poverty is conceptualized. In this study, I have taken an approach where poverty and one of its drivers and consequences – homelessness – are analysed through the lens of everyday experiences and struggles conveyed by marginalized single migrant mothers. By placing their social experiences and reflections at the centre of the analysis, the intention has been to invoke a different epistemology concerning the type of knowledge that is represented and recognised as the 'standard norm'. Diverging from official categories, measurements and definitions, the intention was to allow for the participants to speak from their personal experience, thus granting them the authority as 'credible knowers'. This entailed seeing 'them as full-fledged citizens having valuable knowledge in respect to inequality, in respect to policy, social institutions and structures' (Krumer-Nevo 2017, p. 817). The primary focus has thus been on how the mothers themselves identify and understand the problems facing their families. Sometimes it may be, as argued by Spicker, 'that the issues which poor people point to are not the issues that other people think of as being part of "poverty", but the issues still matter to the people they affect' (2007, p. 241).

The issues raised by the informants in this study, do not always tally with the common understandings of poverty and homelessness as expressed through social policy and practice in Sweden. This dissonance is also central to the implications of the findings. However, my findings are reflective of trends noticeable across advanced welfare states and concerns raised by scholars in Sweden and elsewhere for some time, as outlined in detail both in the introductory chapters and in chapter ten. Yet, my results stand out in one area: how conditional welfare, including sanctions withdrawing the right to emergency shelter, appear to be imposed indiscriminately on families judged as 'structurally homeless', something which in its turn acts to disempower already vulnerable families. The lack of guidelines and general con-

cerns, both on a national and on local levels with regard to the methods, safeguarding standards and time lines that should be used in work involving homeless carers with children, is something I consider deeply troubling. The unmet material, psychological and social needs of mothers and children that run as a thread throughout the narratives shared, and the inability of current systems to respond to, and acknowledge, the pain and distress that this causes, give rise to more overarching concerns with regard to the role and place of social work practice in the receding welfare state and how it interrelates with other policy areas, notably housing, employment, education and child welfare.

According to the ethical guidelines for social workers, developed by one of the profession's largest trade unions in Sweden, 'the demands placed on a client shall be well grounded and objective, and contribute to a more favourable situation for the client' (2015, p. 13). However, how do we determine if a demand is 'well grounded' or 'objective'? On what basis do we judge if the demands contribute to a more favourable situation for the client? The National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) stresses not only that interventions should be of 'good quality' but also the importance of continued evaluation of methods and outcomes (Socialstyrelsen 2013). Emphasis should be placed both on how well the interventions are meeting the demands and expectations stated by the lawmaker and on long-term outcomes for clients. Feedback and suggestions from clients are here seen as important sources of information to identify deficiencies and improve practice. Among other things, 'good quality' for the individual client, can, according to the NBHW, be to be treated with respect and for the best interest of the child to be considered (2013, p. 16). In response to this, the issues raised in this thesis are of the utmost importance.

Conditional welfare has always been a part of the Swedish welfare model. However, the political, economic and social context within which it is applied has changed over time and so have the methods used (Dahlstedt & Lalander 2018; Swärd 2018b). As I explained in chapter seven, the discretionary nature of the Social Service Act means that it is open to interpretation and that this interpretation can change in line with dominant political ideas. Yet, an important foundational principle for statutory social work is an emphasis on a holistic assessment of the individual's situation, where housing is one of the most important factors to consider alongside employment. Although self-sufficiency and individual responsibility are stated goals for the social assistance scheme, the NBHW has put emphasis on the importance of 'underlining that the demand that someone should take responsibility for their own life cannot be pushed endlessly', as possibilities to fulfil requirements can

be limited (Socialstyrelsen 2013, p. 13). The question then becomes: where do we draw the line for what is reasonable to demand?

There are numerous ways in which this question could be answered, but I propose that Beth Watts and Susan Fitzpatrick's (2018) suggestion for an assessment framework that is context-specific, evidence-informed and ethically literate is a good starting point. This also recognises that 'there is an interdependence between ethical reasoning and empirical evidence in settling moral questions pertaining to the justifiability or otherwise of conditionality' (Watts & Fitzpatrick 2018, p. 145). By ignoring the moral questions that underpin social work practice as well as policy-making, the risk of ignoring empirical evidence of harmful malpractice is considerable. By way of summarizing their approach, Watts and Fitzpatrick (2018, p. 157) propose a set of questions that could serve to guide a deliberation on ethical ramifications and justifications of methods used in relation to the conditioning of welfare:

- Does this case of behavioural conditionality seek **legitimate ends**, defensible from appropriate and, ideally, multiple normative perspectives?
- Does the behavioural change incentivised by the proposed conditions **align with the ultimate societal goals** sought?
- Is the conditional approach underpinned by a **plausible theory of change** regarding the desired impact of the requirements, monitoring mechanisms and threatened sanctions on the behaviour of those targeted?
- Is there compelling evidence of the **effectiveness in practice** of the conditional approach in bringing about the desired behavioural changes and the ultimate societal goals sought?
- Does the conditional element of the approach bring **added value**, over and above alternative, non-coercive means of pursuing behavioural change/the goals sought?
- Are the techniques of conditionality used **proportionate**, i.e. do they deploy the minimum level of 'power over' people commensurate with achieving the relevant goals?
- Is the conditional intervention **cost-effective** relative to the available alternatives?

From the evidence and perspectives presented in this study, the legitimate ends of activation measures and sanctions targeting homeless mothers are highly questionable. The normative underpinnings are contradictory in nature as they are based, on

the one hand, on the principles of the best interest of the child and, on the other hand, on norms of behavioural conditionality that favour the individual responsabilisation of the parent and the logic of the market rather than human needs. They do not appear to align with goals stated in the Social Service Act or be underpinned by a plausible theory of change. If the desired impact is that these mothers ‘solve their own housing situation’ and become ‘self-sufficient’, the methods applied do not appear very effective. Similarly, if the desired impact is to safeguard or consider ‘the best interest of the child’, they are failing miserably. Drawing on the experiences and documentation shared by the informants as evidence, there is little indication of long-term considerations regarding impact and costs. Mothers and children housed through ‘social contracts’ at a reasonable cost were evicted and put in expensive privately run emergency accommodation while being pushed to enter the insecure ‘parallel’ housing market. Interactions with social workers were frequent and conflictual under these circumstances, also impacting on workloads. Furthermore, the current approach is complicit in the commodification of vulnerable families, at the same time as it is feeding an illegal letting market where women and children are at risk of exploitation.

Nevertheless, if, as currently appears to be the case, we ignore the outcomes for the mothers and children involved and primarily focus on case-load reduction and reduction of municipal budgets in the Stockholm region (while pushing over costs to other municipalities if a family is ‘successfully’ housed elsewhere) as a measure of effective interventions, we might reach different conclusions. The question is, however, if this can be considered compatible with Sweden’s ultimate societal goals as expressed in Article 2 of the Constitution:

Public power shall be exercised with respect for the equal worth of all and the liberty and dignity of the individual. The personal, economic and cultural welfare of the individual shall be fundamental aims of public activity. In particular, the public institutions shall secure the right to employment, housing and education, and shall promote social care and social security, as well as favourable conditions for good health (Sveriges Riksdag 2016, p. 65).

Furthermore, the Constitution proclaims that ‘public institutions shall promote the ideals of democracy as guidelines in all sectors of society and protect the private and family lives of the individual’ (ibid.). If indeed, the intention is that all Swedish citizens should enjoy the same basic rights, not only with regard to a minimum standard of living but also in terms of inclusion in the community of people who have the right to make claims to justice and recognition, the findings in this study need to be

treated with utmost concern. The living circumstances of families that suffer the consequences of homelessness and poverty should not disqualify them as ‘credible knowers’ and allow for a treatment characterised by impunity. Furthermore, the use of delegated indiscriminate discretion and ‘power over’ welfare subjects in a resource-scarce environment needs to be scrutinized more closely. This matter is too important to remain hidden in the journal notes of individual cases. The silence surrounding the social suffering caused by the intersection of inadequate housing and social policies in the contemporary Swedish welfare state needs to be faced. Otherwise things cannot change and the ‘relational wounds’ will not be healed. So, where do we go from here?

## **Research implications**

A key role of research is to support the advancement of further knowledge. In this study, by placing the social experiences of marginalized single migrant mothers at the centre of my analysis, I have been able to identify themes and concerns that imply a need for further investigation. As I discussed in chapter two, this can be done on the basis of diverse paradigms, which can help us to illuminate a problem, or an issue, from different angles. In this study, I have used a critical approach to the study of poverty and family homelessness. I have not only argued for the importance of letting new audiences into the conversation, but I have also demonstrated that without ‘the voice’ of marginalized groups there are some issues that policy-makers will find hard to grasp. Drawing on my previous experiences as a community representative in research projects in the UK, I believe academics that work in partnership with different communities of interest can play an important role in facilitating this dialogue. Yet, it is important not to idealise participation, without also considering the implications of the politics of representation and how power relations shape rules of engagement (Banks & Brydon-Miller 2018).

It is widely acknowledged that there exists a ‘knowledge gap’ with regard to the effectiveness and outcomes of methods applied within social services in Sweden (Dellgran 2018). In 2016, the Swedish government declared that in order to strengthen the knowledge base in this area there is a need for applied research that involves social service clients (Utbildningsdepartementet 2016). Therefore, the government has invested in developments aimed at strengthening collaboration between research and practice with the aim of increasing the participation of clients and their kin. In chapter three, I discussed at length the ethical and practical implications of

involving vulnerable social service clients in research and the onus this puts on the researcher and the research design. I also pointed at the importance of recognising the different power positions of social workers, researchers, clients and practitioners in other fields. The relationship we have, or are able to develop, with informants, will invariably have an impact on research results and how those are interpreted. Nevertheless, in my view, rather than seeing this as a problem or as a weakness, it should prompt us to recognise the value and complementary status of different research traditions as well as calling for more innovative and interdisciplinary models of research practice.

The questions asked in the previous section regarding the justification of conditionality put on those categorized as ‘structurally homeless’, have ethical, financial, social and political ramifications, which suggests that insights from various disciplines and methodological approaches would be necessary, and ideal, to advance further knowledge within this field. However, in an environment where ‘the political’ is treated as separate from ‘the economic’ and from what is considered to be ‘objective’ social work practice, there is a risk that some forms of knowledge production will be given more value than others. Speaking from the perspective of critical theory, Solomon Benatar, Ross Upshur and Stephen Gill have argued that ‘power is often clothed in epistemological discourses privileging particular interests, often hidden behind claims to universality and objectivity akin to natural necessity’ (2018, p. 164). This, they point out, tends to give rise to a ‘narrow conception of human rights, philanthropy instead of social justice, and a minimally restrained capitalist market economy’ (ibid.). It also favours epistemological frameworks affiliated with a particular positivist version of the social scientific method. Swedish social work scholars have also raised concerns that the narrow focus on evidence-based practice, advocated for by Swedish public authorities, favours certain forms of knowledge over others and thereby acts as a mechanism of exclusion (Dellgran 2018). A lack of critical perspectives and ethnographic or participatory approaches, might hereby mean that ‘the voice’ and experiences of more marginalized groups are erased or ignored as they are not readily captured through such methods – in particular if they are, as is currently the case of ‘structurally homeless families’, defined out of the categories seen as ‘deserving’ of assistance.

The analysis of the empirical data gathered in this study supports the concerns raised by critical theorists and social work scholars. Our position in society and in different power relationships seems to influence both our ‘character’ and our understanding of ‘how’, ‘why’ and ‘to what end’ different methods are used in social work practice (Krumer-Nevo 2017). If we are denied the opportunity to look at mor-

al questions from different angles, the likelihood that we will develop an understanding of a given problem that is based on broad and collective, rather than narrow and individualistic, consciousness-making processes, becomes more limited. There is also a heightened risk that we will contribute to a 'hermeneutical marginalization' of power-inferior groups. However, if we are serious in our intention to be inclusive and incorporate the perspectives of marginalized social service clients, we also need to broaden our view on the meaning and definition of what we mean by evidence in social work practice. This would involve a recognition of the value of new forms of poverty knowledge found at the nexus between lived experience, activism, empirical research and social theory in Sweden.

A main implication for further research on the critical approach to poverty and family homelessness developed in this thesis and the findings presented, is the need for open-ended qualitative research to be used as complementary to quantitative studies. This would help us to better capture the symbolic/relational aspects of poverty and also to better understand the long-term dynamics and impact of housing exclusion, whether people are classified as 'officially' homeless or not. The findings in this study also point at the importance of integrating housing studies within research that is looking at the development of the welfare state and inequality more broadly. Through the experiences shared by the mothers it is evident that housing, employment, caring responsibilities and social welfare policies are intrinsically interlinked in the lives of marginalized single parents. Those experiences are shared across national borders, but might vary in their specificity depending on the regulatory framework. Comparative qualitative research involving single mothers in different nations could help us to explore the impact of different policies and cultural contexts more in detail.

In Sweden, I see a need for further research that more systematically looks at individual trajectories and outcomes for families that are subject to conditionality while suffering from housing precarity, but that are judged as 'structurally homeless'. Currently, the emphasis on gatekeeping and exit within the social assistance system means that social services rarely have any means or methods to follow up where, or how, families with children end up living, or the impact this has on their lives. Consequently, there is no evidence, other than the monetary, on which the quality of the services currently can be judged. In particular, the impact on and the situation of children in relation to methods applied to 'activate' adults need to be investigated further. This would also involve research that looks more in depth at the housing conditions on 'the parallel' housing markets, across Sweden. Although the

empirical data in this study has been collected in the region of Stockholm, there are strong indications that the issues that I have raised are also surfacing in other urban areas of Sweden and that those are ‘spilling over’ into other regions through concerted efforts to move homeless households to more rural and disadvantaged areas of the country. Those issues have political, legal, moral, financial and social ramifications, something which warrants the need for further investigations, preferably through cross-disciplinary approaches.

All of the mothers that took part in this research had a migrant background, which involved transnational ties and experiences. The significant over-representation of this group among mothers that seek help from social services, is an indication that they are a particularly vulnerable group (although they are not classified as such according to current praxis). Yet, in Sweden, equality protection for single mothers, migrants and refugees is increasingly downgraded in favour of policies that put emphasis on labour-market integration and individual effort. Very little research has been undertaken that investigates the intersectional impact of housing, social welfare and employment policies on migrants and refugees from a gender perspective in Sweden or indeed in other EU countries. Furthermore, the junction between women’s and children’s poverty, single motherhood, housing exclusion, migration and gender-based violence, remains underexplored. Research critical for promoting women’s economic and social independence and for reducing child poverty in any given country, will need to take the changing demographics, as well as hierarchical positions and power relations based around migrant status and its intersection with gender and class, into account. Otherwise, furthering gender equality and children’s rights, even in more women- and child-friendly settings, will inevitably be partial, and primarily of benefit to mothers and children who are established already, as currently appears to be the case in Sweden.

## **Policy implications**

In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I explained why it is important for policymakers to gain a better understanding of the living conditions of the most disadvantaged single mothers and their children. Their experience as a group can tell us how well the social policy system is operating and also say something about how effective the welfare state is in protecting women and children from the impact of poverty. Sweden is a country that is ambitious in its societal goals, pursuing gender equality and children’s rights. The current Swedish government prides itself on being ‘feminist in practice’ and is committed to ‘building a society in which women

and men...can live their lives to the full potential', stating that 'gender equality is a matter of human rights, of democracy and justice' (Sveriges Regering 2020). Thus, the findings from this research should also be of great interest.

A feminist approach to policy implies a commitment to the adoption of gender-sensitive and gender-aware practices that not only focus on 'the politics of recognition', but that also acknowledge the importance of redistribution, representation and respect. It implies a 'need to know' how effective social policy is in protecting and safeguarding all women and children, not only those that are able to fulfil the conditions of 'self-sufficiency' in the marketplace. It also implies a recognition that the ethics of individualism is not always compatible with the ethics of care and the interdependence between carers and children. More importantly, it should acknowledge how different policy areas intersect simultaneously in the lives of low-income carers, single or coupled, and the impact this has on their ability to lead autonomous lives (Christopher 2004). Policies aimed at empowering women but that do not acknowledge the material and practical conditions of women's poverty, in particular the poverty of women with sole caring responsibilities, risk creating exclusionary mechanisms such as those described in this thesis. I would in fact argue that a 'feminist' approach to social policy is incompatible with some of the methods and practices described by the informants in this study.

The low poverty rates among single mother households in Sweden compared to the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, cannot only be attributed to labour-market participation, but also to other social policies aimed at 'resourcing' parents so that they could work and care for children. I am not necessarily suggesting a blanket return to what once was – times have changed and so has the environment within which policy-makers are operating. However, we can and should learn from what has worked, and not worked, both in the past and in the present, when we try to find new ways forward. Access to affordable and decent housing was one of the most important resources that helped to enable single mothers, in Sweden and elsewhere, to maintain an autonomous and stable household for their children to grow up in. Not having a place to call home, is one of the most de-stabilising and disruptive conditions under which a family can be forced to live. Most policy-makers would agree with this. In December 2018, the Social Democratic Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, was asked by a journalist what he would say to a homeless mother. He responded that he would say to her that 'You should know that you have the right to get help and that if you don't get it you should turn to your municipality and demand your right. Cases where children are involved need to be prioritized...'. The Prime Minister continued

by saying that ‘no children should have to grow up under such insecure circumstances’. The leader of the Conservative party (*Moderaterna*), Ulf Kristersson, stated that ‘In a welfare country like Sweden no one should have to end up homeless, especially not children’ (Edblom & Mohlin 2018).

In this thesis, however, mothers have shared with me how difficult it is to ‘demand your right’ and we have seen how cases where children are involved are not necessarily prioritized. As long as we continue to blame mothers for their own poverty and marginalize their children ‘by proxy’, the likelihood that this will change is slim. The contradiction between a focus on ‘children’s rights’ within the remit of a social assistance scheme that puts emphasis on parents’ ‘individual responsibility’ was already highlighted in the public inquiry into family homelessness and evictions published in 2005 (SOU 2005:88). This contradiction has never been resolved, but it is urgent that it is – particularly in the light of Sweden’s commitment to ensure children’s right to a ‘reasonable standard of living’ which allows them to thrive and develop. Without an engagement in an ethical deliberation of the nature suggested earlier in this chapter, interpretations based on a ‘market logic’, rather than a ‘broader’ human right’s perspective, will most probably prevail.

On the 1st of January 2020, Sweden incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) into Swedish national legislation. Yet, the debates and concerns regarding different interpretations of ‘children’s rights’ in relation to ‘child poverty’ raised in academic circles, have so far been largely ignored by policymakers, by the legal profession, and in practical social work. The findings in this research, suggest that different implications of ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ interpretations of children’s rights, both within social service practice and in the judiciary, needs to be given further attention. Although the incorporation of the CRC in national legislation seems to imply a commitment to rights-based social protection systems, the question is what means are necessary to achieve such ends. As changes to the Swedish social protection system and labour market have meant that more people become reliant on the means-tested social assistance scheme in the event of unemployment or sickness, the inherent flaws in giving sufficient income protection and support to vulnerable single mothers and their children are increasingly laid bare. This scheme is operating within the realms of a ‘poor-relief’ logic (Panican & Ulmestig 2015), which means that ‘any job’ and ‘any home’ must be accepted if mandated, regardless of any disruption to parenting and caring.

In other words, the implications and impact on both children and women of the current two-tier welfare system, in combination with the development of secondary labour and housing markets, need to be accounted for in any anti-poverty strategy

developed by Swedish public powers. Across the world, feminist political economists are urging governments to design policies that strive for a balance between production and reproduction and that recognise that giving and receiving care is central in life, central to being human and central to the economy (see e.g. Elson 2020). Sweden is often hailed as a ‘good-practice’ example in international comparisons, but as I have discussed throughout this thesis, comparative accounts often fail to take into account the ‘hidden underbelly’ of Swedish society and have a limited understanding of the impact of both demographic and policy changes that have taken place over the past few decades. Nevertheless, as I discussed in chapter ten, the rather extreme differences in living conditions and benefits for those Swedish citizens that are established on the housing and labour markets and those that are not, have also served to distort a collective understanding of what poverty is and means in contemporary Sweden itself. The failure to account for how policies undermine women’s independence and push vulnerable families into destitution can only be explained either by a ‘dehumanization’ of its victims or by a ‘poverty blindness’ among decision makers.

Poverty (*fattigdom*) tends to be associated with a bygone era and the Sweden that was before the development of the welfare state. Rather than talking about poverty, there is a preference among policy-makers to talk about ‘outsidership’ (*utanförskap*) or about ‘inequality’ (*ojämlikhet*), putting emphasis either on the individual agency or ‘failure’ of the poor or on material redistribution. Both accounts have a tendency to objectify those at the bottom of the status hierarchy. Either way, these explanations often ignore the relational or symbolic aspects of poverty that were strongly prominent in the narratives shared by the informants. Thereby, the question of how agents and institutions respond to and recognise the needs of people in poverty becomes secondary to policies aimed at labour-market integration or adjustments to cash transfers. Such policies are of course important, but what my findings show, and what other researchers focusing on women’s poverty have indicated, is the need for more holistic and gender-inclusive policies. Such approaches may be universal in nature, but they also need to be flexible enough to take into account specific barriers facing low-income single mothers and offer vulnerable citizens protection from discrimination and exploitation. Sweden’s commitment to gender mainstreaming is currently not reflected enough in social and housing policies. There is an urgent need to analyse, and address, the differentiated impact of current social and housing policies on women and men (which also encompasses the impact of caring responsibilities) –

in particular, in relation to welfare conditionality and the causes and consequences of family homelessness.

Anti-poverty strategies in Sweden do not only need to be gender sensitive, they also have to be intersectional. This means that there needs to be a recognition of how coercive commodification and asymmetric power relations reproduce hierarchies of gender, race/ethnicity and class in how people are integrated on the labour and housing markets. Depending on where in the 'pecking order' you find yourself, the risk of systemic discrimination and exploitation, and your ability to counter it, will vary significantly. A human rights and social justice approach to gender equality and children's rights should take into consideration the ways in which women in poverty actively try to manage and improve their situation. Here, policy-makers could learn a great deal from women like those that have participated in this research, both in terms of barriers they are facing when trying to move forward and with regard to the type of support that would act as enabling and empowering rather than disempowering and incapacitating. However, in order to do so they will need to recognise them as 'credible knowers', able to interpret their own living situation.

Drawing on a single-mother perspective in policy formation, which I have suggested in this thesis, should not mean stigmatizing or targeting policies, but rather a recognition that families come in many different forms and shapes, and that some need more nourishing and 'resourcing' than others. To achieve such a recognition, however, it will be necessary to think and act differently both in policy formation and in practice. As stated by Frida, one of the practitioners that I interviewed:

It is just awful...it's such an extreme form of disempowerment that they describe it as if they are going crazy. 'I don't know what to do, I just want help and for someone to give me recognition'. But not to be given any form of compassion or understanding that this is a hard situation. To get a cold hand and rejection and having difficulties getting access just create more panic and desperation. That becomes...I mean, I think it is healthy to fight and fight until you get some help and someone who is listening but to be regarded as a crazy person finally... 'Oh, she is crazy, the way she goes about it is completely unreasonable'. Well, or is it the system that is unreasonable? When you don't know where to go with your children, what do you do? Then one could also flip it around and think this is a very resourceful parent who is actually trying to do something good for their child. That is also a path you can take, but then we need different strategies and ways of working.

Those different strategies and ways of working cannot be the responsibility of social services alone; the initiative to do things differently, and the discussion about how to do it, need to stretch across policy areas and different sections of our society. However, as I suggest in the final section of this thesis, the social work profession can lead the way in advocating for a transformative agenda from the ground up. The damaging impact of inadequate methods that use activation and sanctions to ‘incentivise’ homeless single mothers (and other groups that are vulnerable on the housing market), and the subsequent long-term impact on the lives of parents and children, need to be brought to the fore and examined. This needs to be done in tandem with, not in separation from, the ongoing public inquiries into socially sustainable housing solutions in Sweden (Finansdepartementet 2020) and discrimination on the housing market (Arbetsmarknadsdepartementet 2020). It is a matter of recognising that stable and adequate housing is the necessary basis for a family to have a home, and that a home is a necessary prerequisite for both sustainable economic production and the social reproductive side of our human existence that allows us to thrive, develop and live a life in dignity.

## **On the need for a politics of the heart**

While research can help to illuminate the causes and consequences of societal problems and contribute to the advancement of knowledge formation, it is in the process of policy- and law-making and in the practice of social work that change will have to be embodied and enacted. However, I want to end this thesis by insisting that, rather than waiting for initiatives from above, the social work profession should become more proactive and lead the way from the ground. Moreover, it should do so together with the communities it serves. Sama highlighted the importance of recognising the power that a social worker has over a client like herself. Her message was that: ‘You need to think of the human being in front of you – how would you like to be dealt with in this situation?’

Based on the messages conveyed by the women that took part in this study, both single mothers and practitioners, I propose the need for a ‘politics of the heart’ from which we can derive both empowerment and opposition to the damages inflicted by harmful and unjust practice and policy. I have borrowed the notion of a ‘politics of the heart’ from Andrea O’Reilly (2004) who used it to capture what she describes as Toni Morrison’s maternal theory. Hers is a scholarship of African-American literature, but the message that ‘the power of motherhood and the empowerment of moth-

ering is what make possible the better world we seek for ourselves and our children' (p. 171) also fits with the essence of the single-mother perspective. The key aim of social work practice that engages with single mothers that are suffering from poverty and homelessness should always be the empowerment of motherhood and mothering, simply because, in the majority of situations, this is what is in 'the best interest of the child'. From the perspective of marginalized single mothers that suffer the consequences of homelessness and poverty, the disempowerment of motherhood and mothering that is currently so prominent is counterproductive, dehumanizing, harmful to children and described as deeply unjust.

In chapter ten, I suggested that 'the vicious circle of silent exclusion' facing marginalized single migrant mothers in Sweden is a result of unjust social and institutional arrangements, at the same time as it serves to reinforce and perpetuate existing inequalities. I also explained how the misrecognition and misrepresentation that are interlinked with the maldistribution of resources necessary to cope and survive, and the silence by which the contradictions that emerge are treated, transform into a 'crisis of the heart'. This crisis works itself into the character of individuals that interact in social work settings and creates 'relational wounds' that impact on both individuals and institutions. As social work practice, like so many other areas of our lives, has fallen prey to the enticement of marketization, commodification and individual responsabilisation, the heart of social work risks being lost. At the same time, the mother welfare subject is in danger of being cut off from her child through policies targeting her as an individual, disempowering her and dismembering a core part of her sense of self and responsibility. The same policies demolish the social bonds that are essential for care and survival in impoverished communities. In fact, the hearts of the communities themselves are ripped out, as families are scattered across large geographical areas as a consequence of their failure to become successful players in the marketplace.

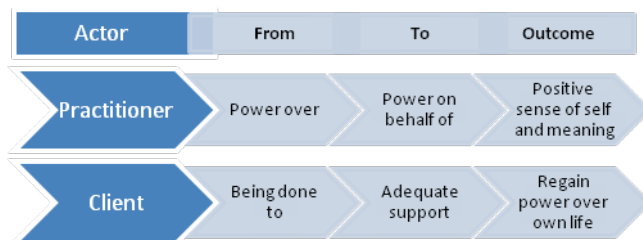
The foundation for an approach encompassing 'a politics of the heart' has to be a framework that takes into account the structural forces that shape both individual and organisational experiences, opportunities and capacities for care of self and others. Rather than imposing 'an ideal' on individuals or situations that easily become constituted as an 'anomaly' and a 'failure' if they don't fit, our starting point should be to accept and find ways of meeting the needs of diverse experiences without judgement. I suggest that the key virtues of an approach that puts the heart at the centre of its politics and ethos would have to be *transformative*, *reflective* and *nurturing*.

Firstly, ethical guidelines and statements of intent in different organisations often highlight the importance of participation, feedback and 'the voice' of service users.

If our aim is to use the knowledge solicited to improve services, we have to acknowledge that from the perspective of the participants this might have to involve radical change. As spelled out by Lister (2004, p. 172), people want power over their own lives, not pity. A transformative understanding of the empowerment of motherhood and mothering therefore recognises that it is not something that can be done to, or for, people, at the same time as it acknowledges that change might not be possible without shifts in hierarchical power relations and a redistribution of resources. These are also principles that are foundational to the social work profession in its commitment to the reduction of inequality and to building social justice. This includes actively challenging discrimination, institutional oppression and unjust policies and practice both through speaking out and in practical work with individuals and communities (International Federation of Social Workers 2020).

Based on my earlier discussion regarding the different experiences of interactions with professionals who were seen as having ‘power over’ or ‘power on behalf of’, I illustrate in figure 4 how a transformative approach could be conceptualized. For a social worker it would imply moving from a position of having ‘power over’ to ‘having power on behalf of’, which would also improve their sense of self and meaning. For the client, or service users, it would constitute a situation where they are moving from ‘being done to’, to a position where they are able to access ‘adequate support’ to regain power over their own lives.

What adequate support means in practice would have to be decided on the basis of a triangulation of *life knowledge*, *practical knowledge* and *academic knowledge* rather than ‘common sense’ and market-driven targets. This transformation would also allow the heart of social work and ‘relational wounds’ to begin a process of healing.



**Figure 4: Transformative practice**

Based on my earlier discussion regarding the ‘vicious circle of silent exclusion’, a transformative agenda has to acknowledge all of the dimensions that contribute to exclusion and disadvantage. For example, it is not enough to recognise that homelessness is a ‘structural problem’, if we do not do anything to alleviate or change its structural foundations or if we, as was prominent in my empirical data, keep blaming the individual victim for her inability to act within those structural constraints.

Secondly, in order to be advocates for change and offer adequate support, it is necessary to acknowledge and critically reflect on the impact of inherent unequal power and privilege. This involves asking difficult questions and actively working to mitigate the negative or harmful influences of systemic power imbalances. It requires the development of an intersectional consciousness that disrupts the idea of social identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, motherhood, worker, etc.) operating in isolation and of culture as being static. In doing so, we also need to recognise the complexity and the contradictions that shape the social experiences of mothers and children suffering the consequences of poverty and homelessness.

A reflective practice means being humble and recognising that learning is a life-long process. The more we know about the living conditions, the structural constraints and the life experiences of the communities we work with, the better equipped we are to engage in meaningful interactions and relationships through which we can build trust and hope. Both individuals and institutions should recognise their accountability in relation to the outcomes of their work, not as measured through monthly targets, but in terms of the extent to which people feel that they are moving closer to regaining power over their lives. Documenting and measuring these forms of human success require more creative approaches to learning and evaluation than keeping records of the numbers of clients who have exited or accessed a service.

Finally, it is widely recognised that nurturing relationships are essential to meet the social and psychological needs of human beings. However, without the material conditions necessary in order to meet these needs and in order for relationships to be built, the ability of a mother to offer care and protection will suffer. The negation of a homeplace where nurturing can be centred is not just a deprivation of a material good necessary for basic living, it is an assault on motherhood and a hold-up of motherwork. Consequently, it deprives the child of their right to a standard of living that is necessary for their ‘physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development’ (Article 27 CRC). Nurturing is a source of power and strength for both children and adults, which helps them to cope, survive and thrive. A ‘politics of the heart’ recognises that the empowerment of motherhood and mothering requires care, encour-

agement and nourishment as well as the material conditions necessary to fulfil social and psychological needs.

To sum up, ethics without care has no real meaning. Social work that is more focused on numbers than on human needs cannot fulfil its mission. Ultimately, a society stripped of emotions and heart, is a society without a soul or a sense of purpose. For things to change, the heart needs to be put back into the political. To recognise the importance of the empowerment of motherhood and mothering, is also to show respect for the rights of children.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to say thank you to the mothers who have actively shared their lives and insights with me, entrusting me with knowledge and experiences. Without you, this thesis would not have been written. Equally, the professionals who shared their thoughts and experiences of day-to-day encounters with homeless families in the Stockholm region should also have a special mention. For research ethical reasons I'm not mentioning you by name, but you know who you are and how much you have meant for the completion of this thesis. I'm glad to finally be able to share it.

Writing a PhD thesis is often described as a journey. For me it took 20 years before I reached the final destination. It started in Brussels where my sociology professor and later manager at the Centre for Women's studies at the Free University of Brussels, Alison Woodward, encouraged me to apply for PhD scholarships. With a detour via Spain, where I worked as a waitress while waiting for responses from universities, I finally ended up with a scholarship at Bristol University. My first two PhD supervisors, Steve Fenton and Tariq Modood, did their fair share to support me on the way, but as a single mother without any steady income in a place where I had no family, the task became unsurmountable and I had to throw in the towel. Yet, my time at Bristol University meant a lot for my development as a researcher and academic. I also had the privilege of being part of an amazing group of Masters and PhD students. My journey became a different one, but this time of my life has still meant a lot for the accomplishment of this thesis, so thank you to all of you! No one mentioned by name, but no one forgotten.

When my daughter was three, I eventually found my way to the place that became my 'home away from home' for almost 10 years – SPAN. A place that allowed me to grow, both personally and professionally. This thesis would never have been written without the insights and knowledge of my colleagues and the parents that shared

their determination, sorrows, hardships and joys with me over many years. Many of whom are still my friends. I am truly blessed to have met you all and I am forever grateful for everything you have given to me and my family. In particular, I want to thank Sue Cohen, one of SPAN's founding members and its CEO for 23 years, for her guidance and friendship over the years. Sue has continued to encourage me to write and get me involved in research projects. She has also played an important role during the work with this thesis as we have co-authored papers and presented together at conferences. Other former SPAN colleagues that have been important during the writing of this thesis are Helen Thomas, with whom I have shared the journey of being a mature PhD student trying to juggle family life and other work commitments, and Suad Yusuf who is always happy to discuss the topics addressed, offer language support and great company during trips to Malmö and Copenhagen.

During my years with SPAN, I also had the pleasure of continuing to work in partnership with academics from Bristol-based universities, both through joint participatory research ventures and through partnerships that brought new educational opportunities to users of the SPAN Study Centre. I'm grateful to all those that were involved in this, and that continue to offer such opportunities to members of the local community long after I am gone. This is what collective empowerment should look like in practice!

When I arrived in Sweden in 2015, I was convinced that any prospect of finishing a PhD was history. However, life is full of surprises and here I am five years on. I want to thank Tapio Salonen who encouraged me to return to academia, and Ola Mattsson at Save the Children for supporting it. Tapio has, together with Linda Lill, in their role as my PhD supervisors both encouraged and challenged me over the years. I would also like to thank Jonas Olofsson and Ingrid Sahlin for their reading and comments at the mid-term and final reviews. Ingrid's comments were particularly helpful when finalising the thesis, as she encouraged me to think differently and more creatively about how to structure the material. Mon Johansson should be thanked for taking the time to read and comment on the first full draft, and Carin Cuadra and Björn Johnson for their reading and comments on the final draft. Having had Save the Children's head office in Stockholm as my main work space during this time, for practical reasons, has meant that I have had less contact with fellow PhD students than in the past. However, I have enjoyed the company of, and discussions with, colleagues in the cross-departmental study group on Welfare and Housing coordinated by Martin Grander and Matilda Sandberg on a regular basis and in seminars at various universities where I have been able to present, discuss and re-

ceive feedback on my work. Katarina Graah-Hagelbäck should also be thanked for taking on the task of proofreading the final draft at short notice.

Numerous colleagues and friends have offered feedback and practical support in various ways and at different stages during the completion of this thesis. In particular, I want to thank Beatrice Amsenius, Eva Harnesk, Shirin Mustafa, Maria Soares Lindberg and Yoseph Yohannes. Many more have encouraged and cheered me on, but you are too many to mention by name. The same goes for my extended family, who have offered me great company during holidays and festivities over the years – by *not* talking very much about my work, you have contributed with distraction and good times. My uncle Torsten should have a special mention and thank you for allowing us to stay in beautiful Ingelsby as much as we want. Part of this work was completed there.

This thesis was written with the spirits of my late mother Ingrid Samzelius and my SPAN colleague and friend Cathy Stanbrook by my side. They never saw the beginning or the end of this work, but they were certainly present throughout it – through the strength that they once passed on to me. In their own personal ways they taught me about courage and the importance of believing in yourself and in others. Their support over the years, both practically and emotionally, helped me to come to the point where I resumed what I thought I had left behind. My mother's care and nurturing is what gave me the resilience and courage to tread my own path and persist, also in the face of adversity.

Finally, but not least, this work could never have been completed without the endless and unconditional support and encouragement from my partner Remi and my father Leif. You keep reminding me that perseverance is what keeps us running that extra mile. Together with my brother Ola, you have also taught me that we are never too old to engage in new adventures. My children Maximus, Maya, Erin and little Zion have offered me much needed diversion and reminders of what is essential in life. I'm now looking forward to starting a new chapter and new journeys together!

Malmö/Vällingby, October 2020.

# SAMMANFATTNING PÅ SVENSKA

## **Den tysta exkluderingens onda cirkel**

### **– Ensamstående mödrars perspektiv på hemlöshet och fattigdom i Sverige**

Hemlöshet och utestängning från bostadsmarknaden har under de senaste tjugo åren blivit ett allt större problem inom den moderna svenska välfärdsstaten. Barnfamiljer är en av de snabbast växande grupperna som lever under osäkra boendeförhållanden. Bland dem som söker stöd och hjälp av socialtjänsten är ensamstående mödrar med utländsk bakgrund och deras barn överrepresenterade. Samtidigt har allt fler kommuner beslutat att grupper som klassificeras som 'strukturellt hemlösa', av vilka en majoritet är barnfamiljer, endast har rätt till nödbistånd i akuta situationer där de tillfälligt kan ges 'tak över huvudet'. Med hänvisning till det egna ansvaret och sociala nätverk nekas idag många hjälpsökande stöd från sociala myndigheter. Individerna förväntas härmed ta ansvar för problem som samhället erkänner som strukturellt betingade.

I denna avhandling undersöks den så kallade strukturella hemlösheten utifrån ett perspektiv som fokuserar på fattigdomens orsaker och konsekvenser inom moderna välfärdsstater. Analysen tar avstamp i sociala teorier där samtida fattigdom betraktas som ett resultat av en orättvis makt- och resursfördelning som inskränker på sårbara gruppers möjligheter att upprätthålla värdiga livsvillkor. Den är även influerad av feministisk vetenskapsteori där erfarenhetsbaserade beskrivningar, som ger underordnade grupper möjligheten att komma till tals, betraktas som viktiga för vår kunskapsutveckling och förståelse för samtida sociala fenomen. Dessa beskrivningar skiljer sig ifrån de normativa föreställningar, officiella definitioner och kvantitativa analyser som ofta ligger till grund för policyutveckling, beslutsfattningsprocesser och resursfördel-

ning. Avhandlingens fokus läggs härmed på att identifiera motsättningar och paradoxer som kan hjälpa oss att bättre förstå angelägna sociala utmaningar.

Studiens huvudsyfte är att undersöka hemlöshet och fattigdom utifrån ensamstående mödrars perspektiv. Denna ansats innebär att den svenska välfärdspolitiken och dess institutioner har analyserats med utgångspunkt från vardagliga erfarenheter och tankar som marginaliserade ensamstående mödrar delat med sig av. Följande frågeställningar har guidat studiens genomförande:

- Vilken ny kunskap om hemlöshet och fattigdom utkristalliseras genom analysen av forskningsdeltagarnas erfarenheter och tankar?
- Vilka teman och maktrelationer är framträdande?
- Vilka motsättningar synliggörs när dessa teman och maktrelationer placeras och analyseras inom en bredare social, ekonomisk och politisk kontext?
- Hur, i sin tur, formar dessa motsättningar de erfarenheter som studiens informanter delar med sig av?
- Vilka bredare politiska och etiska slutsatser kan dras baserat på studiens resultat?

Analysen som presenteras i avhandlingen är centrerad kring ett empiriskt material som inhämtats genom etnografiska observationer och genom intervjuer och samtal med sjutton ensamstående mödrar hemmahörande i region Stockholm under åren 2017-2019. Femton av studiens informanter kom till Sverige som flyktingar, anhörig- eller arbetskraftsinvandrare i vuxen ålder och två som barn. Majoriteten av deltagarnas barn är födda i Sverige. Under studiens genomförande hade informanterna och deras barn levt under osäkra boendeförhållanden, med perioder av akut hemlöshet under två till nio års tid. Deras tillvaro präglades av regelbundna uppbrott och byt mot stundtals långa resor till förskolor, skolor och arbetsplatser samt periodiska kontakter med olika myndigheter. Flera av kvinnorna hade varit utsatta för våld i nära relationer och/eller hade erfarenhet av krig och långvarig flykt. Dessa erfarenheter påverkade fortfarande deras liv på ett eller annat sätt. Den 'erfarenhetsbaserade kunskap' som de ensamstående mödrarna delade med sig av kompletterades vidare med 'praktisk kunskap', inhämtad genom intervjuer med nio yrkesverksamma kvinnor som i sitt dagliga arbete möter föräldrar och barn som lever i hemlöshet och fattigdom. Den nya kunskap som genererats genom forskningsdeltagarnas erfarenheter och observationer placeras, och analyseras, genomgående i studien inom en bredare svensk och internationell ekonomisk och välfärdspolitisk kontext.

Tidigare forskning i Sverige har visat att ensamförsörjande hushåll med barn är en grupp som är särskilt utsatt i relation till förändringar och nedskärningar inom välfärdspolitiken. Bland annat har det lyfts fram hur deras livsvillkor kan ses som ett test för de sociala rättigheternas funktion samt för hur träffsäkert det sociala och ekonomiska skydds nätet är när det gäller att värna och stärka sårbara kvinnor och barn. Före den moderna välfärdsstatens framväxt var det vanligt att ensamstående mödrar tvingades lämna sina barn till fosterhem eller adoptera bort dem. När den generella familjepolitiken och stödet för lågavlönade familjer stärktes i Sverige under nittonhundra-talets andra hälft förändrades även situationen för ensamförsörjande föräldrar, som i större utsträckning blev ekonomiskt oberoende och själva kunde försörja sina barn. Att explicit kategorisera ensamstående mödrar inom välfärdspolitiska åtgärder som i behov av särskilt stöd, ansågs, från 1970-talet och framåt i Sverige, som stigmatiserande och utpekande. I stället inlemmades de och deras barn i den generella familjepolitiken, som var menad att tillföra tillräckliga resurser för att alla barnfamiljer, oberoende av hushållssammansättning, skulle kunna upprätthålla en skälig levnadsstandard och uppnå ekonomisk självständighet.

Sedan 1990-talets krisår har den svenska välfärdspolitiken präglats av principer där individens eget ansvar, valfrihet och autonomi framhävts i större utsträckning än tidigare, då fokus låg på solidaritet och omfördelning. Detta har även påverkat hur det gemensamma samhällsansvaret i förhållande till det egna ansvaret tolkas och utformas inom socialtjänstens arbete med ekonomiskt bistånd. De förändringar som ägt rum i Sverige följer ett internationellt mönster, där tidigare solidaritetsprinciper i allt större utsträckning har blivit ifrågasatta och där sociala och ekonomiska rättigheter villkoras. Bland de metoder som används av organisationer med myndighetsutövande funktioner, har aktivering, krav och sanktioner kommit att spela en allt viktigare roll. Samtidigt ser vi en utveckling där ensamstående mödrar med låga inkomster och deras barn marginaliseras och oftare utestängs från de trygghetssystem som garanterar skäliga arbetsvillkor, lämpliga boendeförhållanden och socialförsäkringar som ger skydd vid sjukdom eller arbetslöshet. Ensamstående mödrar som har begränsade ekonomiska och sociala resurser får därmed allt svårare att upprätthålla en skälig levnadsstandard på egen hand, utan stöd av sociala nätverk eller samhälle.

I Sverige, som i avhandlingen kontrasteras och jämförs med utvecklingen i framför allt Storbritannien, där författaren tidigare varit verksam, har ensamstående mödrar alltid förväntats förvärvsarbeta och därmed bidra både till sin egen försörjning och till den gemensamma välfärden. Samtidigt som detta gjort att ensamstående mödrar löper en relativt sett lägre risk för fattigdom i Sverige än i andra jämförbara

länder, visar denna studie att förväntningarna på dem också har bidragit till att skapa 'blinda fläckar'. Det vill säga att det finns en blindhet för hur parallella förändringar på bostadsmarknaden, på arbetsmarknaden och i socialförsäkringssystemet, samt de generella principer som påverkar synen på individens ansvar, förefaller ha slagit hårdare mot de mest sårbara inom denna grupp än mot andra hushåll med barn. I stället framhäver studiens resultat hur den politik som förs inom olika policyområden sammantaget underminerar dessa familjers möjligheter, både att uppfylla olika krav som ställs genom myndighetsutövning och att på egen hand finna hållbara vägar ut ur fattigdomens gissel. Här framträder en paradox, där en majoritet av Sveriges kvinnor och barn har fått det allt bättre, medan den minoritet som är mest sårbar gradvis blir alltmer marginaliserad och utsatt, vilket saknar erkännande från de samhällsfunktioner vars roll är att skydda människor i behov.

För att synliggöra de olika mekanismer som samspelar i den tysta exkluderingsprocess som de mest marginaliserade ensamstående mödrarna och deras barn drabbas av, är det empiriska materialet i avhandlingen tematiskt organiserat. På så vis tydliggörs de mest betydande orsakerna till och konsekvenserna av exkluderingsprocessen, samtidigt som det är viktigt att understryka att de tematiska områden som behandlas är djupt sammanflätade i de ensamstående mödrarnas vardag. Det första empiriska kapitlet belyser de svårigheter som kan uppstå vid övergångar mellan låga inkomster från olika källor, såsom föräldrapenning, studiemedel, försörjningsstöd, aktivitetsbidrag, förvärvsinkomst, a-kassa och sjukersättning. Det visar också hur bostadsbidraget, som ursprungligen infördes för att ge stöd till ekonomiskt svaga hushåll, inte alltid kommer de mest utsatta till godo och hur osäkra boende- och inkomstförhållanden kan leda till skulder. Arbete framhävs ofta som den främsta lösningen på dessa familjers problem, men mödrarna själva menar att utan tillgång till en stadigvarande bostad blir alla andra aspekter av familjens liv negativt påverkade.

I det följande kapitlet beskrivs de processer och förordningar som medverkar till att barnfamiljer med begränsade inkomster i allt högre grad stängs ute ifrån den reguljära bostadsmarknaden i region Stockholm, vilket i sin tur påverkar kommuner i andra delar av Sverige. Författaren menar att framväxten av en 'parallell bostadsmarknad' för de utestängda bör förstås i relation till den bostadspolitik som förts och de effekter som den har fått. Fokus ligger dock även här på den kunskap om levnadsvillkoren för dem som är utestängda som framkommer genom de ensamstående mödrarnas perspektiv. Olika strategier som används för att lösa tillfälliga och ibland akuta situationer redovisas. Att söka bostad genom internetsajter, sociala medier och olika sociala eller etniska nätverk, ses som mer eller mindre varaktiga nödlösningar snarare än sätt att säkerställa att familjen har ett hem. En bild av en 'parallell bo-

stadsmarknad' träder fram, där de mest sårbara barnfamiljerna blir rättslösa och förvisade till andras godtyckliga väl- eller illvilja.

Samtliga av studiens informanter hade vid något tillfälle sökt hjälp och stöd från socialtjänsten på grund av akut hemlöshet eller ohållbara tillfälliga boendelösningar. Gemensamt för de erfarenheter som mödrarna delade med sig av var känslor av maktlöshet och vanmakt i relationen med socialtjänsten. Reglerna och kraven på ett aktivt bostadssökande upplevdes som otydliga och godtyckliga, vilket i sin tur förorsakade stress och osäkerhet hos de hjälpsökande. Under studiens genomförande blev flera informanter bestraffade genom indraget ekonomiskt bistånd för tillfälligt boende, med motiveringen att de inte hade accepterat eller sökt tillräckligt många bostäder utanför Stockholmsområdet. Erfarenheterna som informanterna delade med sig av avspeglar resultat som redovisats i tidigare svensk forskning om aktivering av arbetssökande. Denna studie är dock den första i sitt slag i Sverige, där hemlösa barnfamiljers erfarenheter, och bestraffningarna de utsätts för, redovisas och problematiseras utifrån ett resurs- och rättviseperspektiv och där de som drabbas själva delar med sig av sina erfarenheter.

Utifrån ett sådant perspektiv bör socialtjänstens agerande och bemötande framför allt ses som en effekt av ett större strukturellt sammanhang, där de problem som uppstår i kölvattnet av bristen på bostäder för ekonomiskt svagare grupper, övervärtas på enheter för ekonomiskt bistånd. Det är ekonomiska parametrar, snarare än mänskliga behov, som då hamnar i fokus. De nödlösningar som erbjuds, eller påtvingas, akut hemlösa barnfamiljer i Stockholmsregionen, och ibland i andra delar av Sverige, beskrivs i avhandlingen som en del av en ny marknad där privata aktörer erbjuder undermåliga, och ur ett barnperspektiv olämpliga, tillfälliga boenden till hög kostnad. Även de mer permanenta lösningar som erbjuds sågs ofta som olämpliga av studiens informanter på grund av läge och/eller storlek eller på grund av att barnfamiljer förväntades bo under kollektiva förhållanden med främlingar. I det sista empiriska kapitlet analyseras de mänskliga konsekvenserna av den rådande situationen – framför allt för moderskapet och vardagslivets praktikaliteter. Det som bland annat den franske sociologen Pierre Bourdieu har kallat ett 'socialt lidande' – psykologiska och sociala effekter av materiell nöd och symboliska aspekter av fattigdom – blir här synliggjort genom informanternas beskrivningar och reflektioner.

I avhandlingens avslutande kapitel analyseras resultatet av den empiriska studien med hjälp av teorier som belyser globala och lokala samhällsförändringar som kan knytas till rådande ekonomiska och politiska maktordningar och relationer. De ensamstående mödrarnas lidande och deras svårigheter att uppfylla inkonsekventa krav

ses här som ett resultat av motsättningar som intensifierats genom de senare årtiondenas betydande finansialisering av samhället. I det vakuum som uppstår när välfärdsstaten utarmas och individen förväntas ta ett större eget ansvar, blir fattiga ensamstående mödrars situation återigen en anomali som inte 'passar in' när de krav som ställs på självförsörjning, och på förmågan att lösa den egna boendesituationen och göra 'bra val', inte kan uppfyllas av individen på egen hand på det sätt som förväntas av myndigheter. Värst drabbas de som saknar stöttande sociala nätverk och egna resurser, såsom kvinnor och barn som varit utsatta för våld, de som har flytt från krig och förföljelse och de som har språkhinder eller begränsad arbetslivserfarenhet i Sverige.

I analysen framträder en 'fattigdomsparadox' och en ond cirkel, där de som är drabbade avhumaniseras och skuldbeläggs för sin egen olycka. Samtidigt blir barns bästa och välbefinnande åsidosatt när deras mödrar får stå till svars för strukturellt betingade problem som de omöjligt kan råda bot på utan samhällets ingripande. I avhandlingen framhävs att den bristande kunskapen om dessa familjers levnadsvillkor, samt strukturerna som leder till att marginaliserade ensamstående mödrar sällan, eller aldrig, kan utmana den dominerande diskurs som styr socialpolitik och interventioner, har lagt grunden till en process som resulterar i social och ekonomisk utestängning. Frånvaron av ett erkännande av de svårigheter och det lidande som uppstår, i kombination med bristfälliga samhällsresurser och avsaknad av representation som möjliggör en förståelse för marginaliserade gruppers livsvillkor, leder till en ond cirkel av tyst exkludering. Även om det framför allt är de familjer som marginaliseras som känner av och påverkas av den rådande situationen, berörs i slutändan hela samhället.

Bristen på representation och erkännande i kombination med otillräckliga resurser har även en direkt påverkan på det sociala arbetets villkor. När socialsekreterare fråntas de resurser och det handlingsutrymme som möjliggör en förflyttning från ett utövande av 'makt över' familjer som begränsas av fattigdom till ett utövande av 'makt å den andres vägnar', öppnas 'relationella sår' som blir svåra att läka utan en radikal förändring. De grundläggande etiska principer som ska vägleda det sociala arbetet blir också svårare för enskilda medarbetare att följa och förhålla sig till. När ekonomi och juridik får ta alltför stort utrymme på bekostnad av mänskliga behov och drivkrafter, urholkas kärnan i det sociala arbetet. I grunden, menar författaren, visar studien att även de mest marginaliserade mödrarna framför allt vill ha makt över sina egna liv; de vill inte skuldbeläggas eller ha medlidande.

Sammantaget påvisar avhandlingen behovet av en översyn av den villkorade välfärdens arbetsmetoder, resultat och etiska grundbultar – i synnerhet med barnets

bästa i åtanke. Den synliggör också behovet av en politik där bostaden blir en del av den bredare frågan om, och behovet av, grundläggande välfärd och ett gemensamt ansvarstagande.

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# APPENDIX

## Sources of income except employment

<b>National Insurance Agency</b>		
Parental benefit	Parental benefit is paid out for 480 days for one child. For 390 days, the compensation is based on the income one has (days at the sickness benefit level). For the other 90 days, the compensation is 180 SEK per day (days at the minimum level). The days can be used on a part-time basis and until a child is eight years old.	250 SEK <sup>41</sup> per day pre tax
Introduction benefit	The introduction programme is a special programme through the Public Employment Service that is intended to help new arrivals become part of Swedish society. Within the introduction programme, you can, for example, study Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), look for work, or do an apprenticeship at a workplace.  Being a new arrival means that you have: A residence permit as a refugee, quota refugee or person in need of protection. A residence permit based on a tie to a person granted a residence permit as a refugee, quota refugee or person in need of protection.	308 SEK per day tax free

<sup>41</sup> In July 2020, 1 Swedish Krona (SEK) equalled 0.097 euros.

Activity grant	<p>Job seekers that participate in a program organised through the Public Employment Service. For example:</p> <p>Labour market training</p> <p>Work experience</p> <p>Introduction programme</p> <p>Preparation activities</p> <p>The job and development programme</p>	223 SEK per day pre tax
Housing allowance	<p>You can receive housing allowance for families with children if:</p> <p>You have a child/children living with you, you pay more than 1,400 SEK a month for your housing,</p> <p>you live and are registered at the address you are seeking allowance for.</p>	<p>How much you can receive depends on:</p> <p>Your income</p> <p>The number of children living in your home</p> <p>What your housing costs</p> <p>The size of your residence</p>
Sickness benefit	Sickness benefit is money you can receive if you are unable to search for or take a job due to illness.	Depend on previous income
Child allowance	Child allowance is a financial support that is automatically paid out to parents who live and have children under 16 in Sweden.	<p>If you and the other parent have joint custody, you share the child allowance. You will each receive 625 SEK per month. If you have sole custody of the child, you receive 1,250 SEK per month.</p>

Maintenance support	Maintenance support is money that you can apply for when the other parent who is supposed to pay child support does not pay.	1,573 SEK per month up until the month the child turns 11, and 1,723 SEK until the month the child turns 15 and 2,073 SEK after this.
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### **Municipal Social Services**

Social assistance	<p>Social assistance is a means-tested benefit administered by municipal social services. It is composed of two parts: direct assistance and general assistance. Direct assistance is supposed to help cover daily living expenses such as groceries, clothing, and rent payments, utility bills (electricity, telephone, Radio/TV license, gas etc.), travel expenses, home insurance and union costs. General assistance covers other necessary expenses such as childcare costs, health related costs, medicine and costs for dental care. If agreed, social assistance can also cover the cost of emergency accommodation.</p> <p>Applications are made on a monthly basis and can be refused on the basis of lack of the right paper work or evidence of need.</p>	<p>The level of social assistance is set by the Swedish parliament on a yearly basis. A national norm is set to cover basic costs and will depend on the number of individuals in a household as well as the number of children. For example, a household with one adult and one child aged 7-10 would receive 7,180 SEK year 2019. Net income from any work or even cash gifts are generally deducted from benefits with 100%. To receive assistance, applicants need to be more or less destitute and have no savings.</p>
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<b>The Swedish Board of Student Finance</b>		
Education entry grant	The education entry grant is for those who have been unemployed for a long time and need to pursue a compulsory school or upper secondary school course in order to get a job. This is a grant that you can receive for a maximum of 50 weeks if you are studying full time.	2,208 SEK per week + additional child allowance.
Student grants and loans	Student grants and loans are intended for students who are studying at e.g. college, university or vocational college. Those over the age of 20 can also apply for student grants and loans for studies at compulsory and upper secondary level at Komvux (adult education college) or folk high school. The loan has to be paid back over a period of time and with a low interest rate.	The grant is 809 SEK per week and the loan 1,860 SEK per week. Parents can get an additional child allowance.
Driving license loan	If you are unemployed, you can borrow money from CSN in order to be able to obtain a Swedish category B driving licence. You may find it easier to get a job if you have a driving licence. To be entitled to the loan, you must be unemployed and aged between 18 and 47. You must also meet certain conditions. You may borrow a maximum of 15,000 SEK. You must repay the loan later, even if you have not obtained a driving licence.	





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