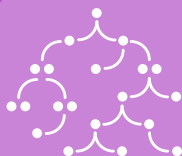




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Negotiating Non-Motherhood Representations, Perceptions, and Experiences

Edited by
Jenny Björklund · Dovilė Kuzminskaitė
Julie Rodgers

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Alternative Happy Endings? A Qualitative Study of Non-Mothers in Lithuania

Lina Šumskaitė

INTRODUCTION

Women's decisions whether and when to have children are often influenced by circumstances and internalised cultural beliefs (Meyers 2001). The vast majority of studies in this area address voluntary (Houseknecht 1982; Kelly 2009; Cummins et al. 2021) and involuntary childlessness, mostly focussed on couples'/women's experiences facing infertility (Gouni et al. 2022; Peterson et al. 2011). Authors claim that reasons for remaining childless or choosing not to have children should be analysed at



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both macro and micro levels. The impact of structural changes on societal and cultural attitudes are analysed as macro-level causes of rising childlessness rates in Europe (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017). From a micro-level perspective, Gayle Letherby (1999, 2002) and Jeanne Safer (1996), in their autobiographical reflections of their paths from infertility to their conscious decision not to have children, show the overlap of circumstances and autonomous agency. Comparing their own experiences with other women's, they reach the conclusion that decisions about children are complex and continuous throughout the entire period of the reproductive age.

Demographic studies in Lithuania show that the presence of childless women in fertility rates has, until now, been fairly low, less than 10 per cent (Stankūnienė et al. 2013; Stankūnienė and Baublytė 2009; Stankūnienė et al. 2003) and it is only in recent years that a marked rise in the proportion of childless women can be detected (Tretjakova et al. 2020). In light of these statistics, women's experiences of non-motherhood have not received much scholarly or scientific attention in Lithuania, although this is beginning to change. For example, the first notable small-scale qualitative research on the voluntary decision not to have children was completed in 2012 by a Master's student of Sociology (Leonavičiūtė 2012). Another qualitative study on two generations of women's experiences of living without children was carried out in 2017–2018.¹ The research on 44 reproductive age and older women reveals that women's decisions if and when to have children are very much dependent on circumstances such as finding a suitable partner and feeling secure financially (Tretjakova et al. 2020). It is clear that women in Lithuania, as in other Eastern European countries, experience the pressure of pronatalist society (Gedvilaitė et al. 2020). The dominant discourse of motherhood serves to intensify childless women's feelings of exclusion (ibid.), even if they take care of children in their close surroundings (Šumskaitė and Gevilaitė-Kordušienė 2021).

The aforementioned qualitative study dating from 2017–2018 explores women's experiences of non-motherhood as captured at a specific moment in time through the forum of the interview process. While the original group was much larger in size, this particular chapter concentrates on the narratives of a specific sub-set of 12 women. This is because the overall

¹Interviews were gathered in the framework of the project "Childlessness in Lithuania: Socio-Cultural Changes and Individual Experiences in Modern Society," No. S-MOD-17-3, financed by the Research Council of Lithuania.

study was carried out by a number of colleagues, with each individual being responsible for their own sub-group. One of the most salient points that emerges when analysing the narratives of the 12 reproductive-age women (the focus group for this chapter) is that they considered having a child at least several times in their life and faced questions about their non-motherhood and their own personal trajectory throughout their whole reproductive lives, possibly longer. In this chapter, I will discuss the experiences of women who are non-mothers, showing (a) how women relate their non-motherhood experiences to the widespread notion in society that children should bring meaning to life; (b) how women live in familial relationships and how they describe *family*; and (c) what it means to women to be independent and to seek self-realisation. The findings show that almost all of the women in their teenage years had a vision of future marital life with children, while later on only a few still believed that raising children was most important in bringing meaning to their lives. Extended familial relationships were stressed by most of the women, and only a few highlighted the relationship with partners as the most important thing in their lives. Employment status was the primary facet for maintaining high self-esteem, as it provided feelings of independence and financial security.

The term 'non-motherhood' is used in this chapter as it is more accurate than 'childlessness' and 'childfreeness.' Only a few women from the sample could be described using the terms 'childless' or 'childfree.' Those who experienced failures in getting pregnant and possibly were involved in fertility treatments expressed deep feelings around their lack of children, so the term 'childless' was applicable for them. Only one woman told a story of making a conscious decision not to have children; her narrative corresponds with the term 'childfree.' Still, others shared complex pictures of experiences of their own decisions and the circumstances they faced. Those women who were postponing having children hadn't felt a lack of children yet, so the term 'childlessness' was not suitable to describe their position or feelings. And for those who were at the end of their reproductive age but remain without children because of circumstances, the term 'childfreeness' is not applicable either. Hence, the term 'non-motherhood' is used as an umbrella term that covers a wide range of experiences of not having children. This chapter contributes to the volume presenting empirical evidence about various experiences of non-motherhood during women's reproductive life.

METHOD

The sociological analysis is based on 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews, conducted in 2017 with 29- to 47-year-old single and coupled women who did not have children for various reasons. Most of women lived in the capital or another big city. Interviews were conducted with women with post-secondary education, even though the study did not purposely focus exclusively on highly educated women. Nevertheless, research shows that not having children is more widespread among women with tertiary education and living in big cities (Gedvilaitė- Kordušienė et al. 2019). Nine women had a partner, four of them were married, only three women were single. Most of the women engaged in heterosexual relationships with only one woman living in a same sex partnership. Seven women were living with a partner, four were living alone, and one was living with parents. Nine women were employed, two were studying and one was unemployed during the interview.

Interviewees were found using the snowball method. Some women I knew from my own leisure activities, one woman belongs to my work environment, one woman is a relative living in another city, and others were recommended by colleagues and friends. In relation to women I knew personally, the status of the relationship prior to the interview was not one of close friendship, nor did it evolve in this direction post-interview. I met 5 women from the group of 12 for the first time during the interview process. The majority of interviews were conducted in public places, mostly in cafés, with one in a library, one at the home of the interviewee, and several at their places of work. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours each, with the average duration being 1 hour, 13 minutes.

All of the women described themselves as non-mothers, even the one whose husband had children living with an ex-wife. She did not label herself as stepmother, even though she looked after children occasionally. The questions directed to the women were broad, covering the women's romantic relationships, professional lives, relationships in their parents' family, most important events in their lives and circumstances around how the question of children appeared. The interview material was coded and analysed using the Maxqda programme (version 18) using content analysis method.

IDEA OF CHILDREN AS THE MEANING OF LIFE

Non-motherhood as a valid identity and a lived experience has only recently begun to be acknowledged. This can be seen both in women's postponing of reproduction (Lebano and Jamieson 2020) and, more directly, in overt declarations of the decision not to have children (Kelly 2009; Cummins et al. 2021). In this study, pronatalist norms and the idea of motherhood as central to feminine identity were present in the women's narratives, and the women negotiated these norms in different ways. Some of the women explicitly stated that family and children were most important to them and would give their lives meaning. Dagnè (45) refers to having an "empty life" without family and children: "If I could have a family and children, that would be most important. [...] As there is not, there is nothing important (laughing), I don't know, I live for today." Inga (35) and Eglè (29), facing fertility issues, decided to adopt a child, as they could not imagine a family without children. And Neringa (35)² prioritised children and family over professional achievements: "I see meaning in life in the family, not at work, career or something else [...]. You bring up a new person, to whom you give your own values, I think that is life's biggest secret and meaning."

However, most women were less upfront about children as the meaning of life. Younger interviewees talked about how they wanted to postpone having children until they were married and had followed other plans and goals. Grytè (29) considered having children a life stage, when your friends began having children and you need to have something to take care of, and Goda (31) stated that children brought positive changes in life—"life becomes a bit different when you have children." Still Goda and some other women around the age of 30 expressed conflicting feelings about their reproductive plans. Goda felt younger than her biological age and had postponed her plans to have children until after marriage and building a home with her partner:

In my heart I feel very good because I feel like I'm 24 years old [...] I realise [...] that 31 is already a limit, when you're supposed to have had children, because you should at around 27 or so according to doctors [...] older age is a risk of not having children at all, and you can have a lot of problems [...]

²During interview Neringa was single, but she had a plan to fulfil her wish to have a child as a solo mother using a sperm donor, if she doesn't meet the right partner in the next few years.

my Evaldas³ wishes we already had children, but again there is no home, no family, I mean marriage, and we come back to the beginning, where we started. (Goda 31)

These women positioned having children within a temporality, according to which some things, such as marriage, should happen first. This illustrates the impact of what Jack Halberstam (2005) refers to as “a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality” (4). According to Halberstam, normative temporality is structured around reproduction, and a normative life is supposed to follow a certain course: “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Goda’s wish to marry and build a house for a family before trying to have children can be positioned within the logic of reproductive temporality. She places these markers of life experience in a particular order—marriage before reproduction—and she does not question the need to fulfil all these elements of what she considered to be a mature adult life. At the same time, Grytė and Goda also placed reproduction in the vague future, and Goda considered herself younger even if she was aware of the medical recommendations for the ideal biological age to have children. In these cases, the women’s sense of time seems to be more in line with Halberstam’s concept of queer time, which breaks with normative temporality. Crossing youth/adult boundaries and postponing reproduction does not follow the linear thinking of reproductive temporality.

Monika (31), though the same biological age as Goda, treated the time for children as passing by. However, she stressed several other reasons for not having children. The main ones were that her partner doesn’t want children, society’s negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships, and some financial and emotional barriers. Monika expressed feeling trapped in negative circumstances and stated that the decision to not have children was made for her.

M.: It seems to me that it has already been silently decided [...] that I will not have my own biological child anyway, I don’t know.

I.: Who has decided?

M. Well, it seems so to me. Well, because I’m so old ... [...] I’m not 25 anymore, well, my partner doesn’t want to, the financial possibilities don’t allow it now, and in a year, I don’t think it will have changed much, maybe

³The name of the partner has been changed.

in three years [...] If I bring a child to the world I have [...] to be financially and emotionally stable. So far I am neither of those. (Monika 31)

In her youth, before stepping into a same-sex relationship, Monika imagined having a husband and children. She states that she “loves children,” and when she considers the question of having her own, she thinks raising a child alone would be an easier solution than in a same-sex partnership in an unaccepting society. Monika’s statement illustrates the impact of the negative societal attitudes towards same-sex families in Lithuania, as she anticipates breaking with the linear thinking of normative temporality to cause less resistance than building an alternative same-sex family. Even if normative temporality is a heteronormative construction and can be placed within a heteronormative framework (Halberstam 2005, 10), explicit homosexuality is thus considered to deviate even more from heteronormativity than raising a child outside of marriage. However, at the moment Monika only considers this possibility on a theoretical level and chooses to be content with being with a *loving partner*.

Prioritising a partner or a partner’s needs over having children is a recurring trope in the women’s narratives. Norvilė (36) declares conflicting feelings about the idea of children as the meaning of life, as she prioritises her relationship with her husband over children. As Norvilė and her husband faced unwanted non-parenthood, her attempts to find out the biological reasons for not getting pregnant raised conflicts between the partners. Her husband has been convinced he is infertile since childhood, though he refused to go to a doctor for a confirmed diagnosis. He also had negative attitudes towards adoption. Norvilė’s attempts to talk about having children openly ended in her husband’s ultimatum, with a threat of breaking up. Therefore, Norvilė accepted living without children, as she appreciated her relationship with her partner. She revealed that both partners experience some sadness about not having children; still they cope by rationalising their situation. The major argument for accepting non-parenthood was based on deeper fears: Norvilė’s husband has a sister suffering from epilepsy and with a minor intellectual disorder, and Norvilė witnessed her grandmother, who lost her sons: “My husband and I sometimes think very philosophically. Giving birth and having a child is not necessarily happiness, it’s ok if everything is fine and healthy. [...] Maybe you should be happy that it [reproduction] isn’t given, because maybe that protects you from more difficult experiences.”

Jorè (29) told a different story. She did not imagine having children until she was a student and fell in love with a man with whom she went to university. Only then did she feel a desperate desire to have a child with him: “I thought that it doesn’t matter, if he will be with me or not, at least let me have his baby (laughing).”

When Jorè (29) thought about children with her husband she also reflected that the wish to have a child did not appear at the beginning of their relationship. Only after living together and feeling safe did she try to get pregnant. Some reproductive health issues were disclosed, and at the time of the interview, Jorè was not sure about the right time to have a child. She also had doubts as to whether she needed to have children at all. On the one hand, she wanted to feel free to run her business (she teaches yoga and opened her studio recently). Sometimes she also felt tired looking after her husband’s children from a previous marriage and her neighbours’ children. On the other hand, she regularly felt an *instinctive wish* to have a child during her menstrual cycle, which she ties to hormones. After sharing that feeling with her husband, she got his assurance that he would help with the childcare in order to let her continue her occupation after giving birth. Since her husband was more experienced from having children from a previous marriage, she listened to his encouragements and planned to try getting pregnant in the near future. According to Diana Tietjens Meyers (2001), it’s very difficult for women to make autonomous decisions about reproduction. A woman has to put constant efforts towards becoming conscious about her own inner feelings of making the decision whether or not to have children and separating them from the outside pressure from close surrounding and internalised cultural beliefs from society.

For most women in the sample, it was important to be married before having children, which suggests that they positioned reproduction not only within the temporality mentioned above but also within a heteronormative framework. Those who remained single, Toma (39), Dagnè (45), and Virga (47), reflected on not having considered the option of raising a child alone. Virga (47) and Dagnè (45) experienced encouragement to become solo mothers. Virga heard such views from female acquaintances when she bought a flat. Having a stable job and her own place to live was considered a good situation for raising a child. Dagnè (45) got an offer to have a baby with a former romantic partner, who was married but offered her financial support for raising a child. Dagnè refused this offer and remained strict in her attitudes that a child should be raised in a normative configuration of a family. She tried to get pregnant with her current

romantic partner, but she refused to consider adoption if they remained living apart: “A child is not an object that you can purchase when you cannot give him a family. I never considered it.”

Toma (39) and Virga (47) hadn’t had any long-lasting romantic relationships. Though they were open to that, they were not actively looking for a partner. Toma did not mind being a stepmother to her future partner’s children. Both women did not reveal a deep desire to have children; a big portion of their interviews focused on how they experienced their life as single women and how they were treated by others.

One of the interviewees, Rugilè (44), explicitly contradicted the idea of children as the meaning of life. She admitted that in her teenage years, she was influenced by society and had an image of a traditional family with children for herself as well. Still, she always followed her inner voice and realised she did not want children in any of her romantic relationships, even though she faced this expectation from some of her ex-partners and their parents: “Thank God that I had something, I don’t know what to call it, maybe confidence in myself. [...] When you’re really aware, what you want. [...] It is not that I don’t like children. I like children. I think you can make children only then, when really an inner wish comes to have them. [It] really never came to me. [...] I thought that this wish for children might come sometime later, and I would want that, but now I certainly don’t” (Rugilè 44). Rugilè declared that the feeling of happiness does not relate to having a child or relationship with a partner. According to her, inner satisfaction with life should come first, and then it spreads into other areas of life: “I look at families, and I see that children do not make you happy. Or your husband doesn’t make you happy [...] Often [parents] don’t have anything in common, but a child came along and it becomes so sad. [...] If you’re content inside, then you’re content there and there, and there [...]. Not the other way [around].”

In short, the women in the study discussed how children fit into their lives (or not) in different ways. Several women stated that children mean a lot to them and that they had plans to raise a child in the near future. Almost all interviewed women had a vision of their future in a family with children when they were young, which suggests that the idea of children as the meaning of life for women holds strong. For most of the women, children were inseparable from partnership and a particular image of family, which indicates that they placed reproduction within a logic of reproductive temporality and a heteronormative framework. Some of the interviewed women had doubts about the idea that children brought

meaning to life, and one of them, Rugilė, openly confronted the idea. She instead stated that inner satisfaction with life is not related to having a child or partner. Other women, like those who faced external barriers to having children—such as remaining single in their forties or encountering their partners’ refusals to try some alternative ways to have children (reproductive technologies or adoption)—had just begun to be comfortable with the idea of non-motherhood as an alternative path to a happy life.

WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN?

Sociology of the family has focused on the nuclear model since the beginning of the twentieth century (Burgess 1926). The Industrial Revolution and urbanisation led to structural changes in the extended family, and the nuclear family became a new ideal in Western societies and sociological research. At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, a diversity of family forms and relationships were acknowledged (Stacey 1998), and that raised questions about the meaning of the family (Levin and Trost 1992). Sociological research on the family in Lithuania started much later, only at the end of the twentieth century, and predominantly focused on the nuclear family institution (Česnūitytė 2015). Subsequently, it has taken Lithuanian society longer to accept new forms of family, such as looking more favourably on children born out of wedlock, accepting migrant families and acknowledging men’s and women’s decisions not to have children.

However, even if the concept of family has become more diversified in Lithuania in recent years, the norm to have children still holds strong. The non-mothers in the study negotiated this norm in various ways during the interviews, even if few of them questioned it explicitly. Only Rugilė (44) criticised the overvaluing of family and children in Lithuania in comparison with Western countries. She states that in Lithuania, she observed more families where partners have a distant relationship, connected only through their child. Even if most of the women in the study were not critical of the importance of family, they talked about family in a much broader sense than the nuclear family.

There was no direct question about the meaning of family in the interviews, but the women often stressed that family is the most important area in their life. However, for many of the women, ‘family’ did not refer to the nuclear family, and their more expansive ways of talking about their families widen the definition of family and as such can be seen as a resistance to

the nuclear family norm. Those women who had a partner usually saw their partner as the most important person in their life and underscored that a family does not have to include children. As previously mentioned, Norvilè (36) prioritised the relationship with her husband over children: “I always thought that the most important relationship is with my husband, that family is a man and woman and children are a result. So I never [...] desperately wanted children. [...] We heard among our friends that when we had children we would become a real family. [...] It doesn’t match with my point of view.”

Eglè (29) and Inga (35) also stressed their husbands as the most important persons in their lives, giving them emotional support, which was crucial for them during the process of infertility treatment. Eglè emphasised, “It is very important to support each other. If one breaks down, the other has to lend a hand—help them up.” A longitudinal study on couples’ relationships after five years of unsuccessful infertility treatment shows that relationships among partners might get stronger (Peterson et al. 2011). However, Norvilè (36) faced undiagnosed fertility issues as a source of conflict with her husband when she raised the question of children. As mentioned in the previous section he refused to go to fertility specialists and was against adoption⁴ and assisted reproductive technologies. When Norvilè offered one of these options, she faced an ultimatum for separation and finding another partner to have children. Still, according to social exchange theory (Rank and LeCroy 1983) Norvilè gets more from the relationship with her partner in comparison with the costs of conflicts about having children. Mark R. Rank and Craig W. LeCroy (1983) emphasise that looking for rewards and costs of the communication explains why some relationships become more valuable than others. Norvilè describes her husband as “the biggest present in my life. [...] Even as a sign of God, because my husband is very good to me. He accepts all of me, with all my disabilities, I mean, being in a depressed mood, being unemployed, in short, everything ... (tears appear).”

Other interviewees stressed the importance of familial bonds beyond the nuclear family. Some highlighted family members such as their own parents and siblings, and some women distinguished extended family relationships with relatives such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. For Virga (47), it remained important to have a stable relationship in her extended family.

⁴His argument against adoption is that the majority of kids in children’s homes have health issues. As he studied pedagogy, he used to visit children’s homes.

None of her aunts and uncles had been divorced. However, recently her younger brother faced divorce, and since then Virga's sense of what makes a family has changed: "we knew all along: parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts... everyone, you knew who was who."

When Jorè (29) recently got married, she moved to the countryside near her parents and some other relatives. She treated relationships in the extended family as a community: "The community in the village, it is my family also (laughs). Since I also live near my parents, when someone comes to see my parents, [...] they come to my place [...] If there is any work [...] potato digging or something, then everyone is together."

When Virga (47) moved from her hometown for studies, she lived with her aunt. It was treated as a privilege to live with relatives instead of in the dormitory. Since then, she prioritises keeping close relationships with siblings and cousins. Inga (35) also treated her aunt's and cousins' home as her own, as she used to spend a lot of time there after the death of her mother, when she was 18 years old: "during holiday I always came back to [my aunt's] from the dormitory, so I always had a home."

The exchange of social support was seen as one of the characteristics of a family relationship. It could be given in extended families and did not have to be limited to the nuclear family. Virga (47) and Jorè (29) grew up in large families. Jorè has three sisters; Virga, four siblings. Both women witnessed practical support in the extended family. Virga saw how the siblings of her father helped to build their house: "They come for the weekend and the floor is plastered [...] or they cover the roof."

However, some of the interviewees had problems with the exchange of social support in their extended families. Toma (39) missed practical and emotional support from her parents and brother. She thought that family should be the most important source of support in life: "It should be like a harbour." However, Toma faced unfulfilled requests; therefore, she stopped asking her brother and father for favours, as the emotional costs outweighed the benefits: "Unfortunately, family is [...] as God gives [...]. For example, if I ask you to do something, and you agree and later you do it your own way [...] It's better not to ask [...] It's too hard on your nerves."

Inga (35) disclosed the emotional costs of financially supporting her brother's family. She reflected on not feeling close to her brother and supporting him only because she felt bad for his children. Her husband also provided practical support for his mother and sister's family as they both live without partners. This situation sparked Inga's thoughts about

emigration. She wanted to escape “living the lives of others”: “Yes, partly to run away, because we both are the kinds of people that we would take off our last pair of pants so that others would be fine (laughing), but sometimes it’s very tiring as you take on others’ problems as your own and you’re worrying and stressing.”

Having children was also seen by some interviewees as a way to strengthen other familial bonds. Grytė (29) and Goda (31) thought that having children might refresh communication with their own parents. Grytė noticed that her parents spend more time with her older sister, as she has small children, and Goda witnessed her parents provide childcare support for her older sister as well. Grytė wished to work less and to spend more time with her parents, and having children could be a rational excuse to make a break from the intensive schedule of her professional life.

What stands out in the women’s narratives is that ‘family’ does not necessarily refer to the nuclear family. Their more expansive definition of family can be seen as resistance to the nuclear family norm, which is still strong in Lithuania. The women describe the family as a source of emotional and practical support, and this could be given by various people around them: partners, parents, siblings, and extended family members. Greater emotional support was mainly expected and received from romantic partners. In the extended family it was more often expected to keep in touch (to meet more often) and to exchange practical support. Still, some interviewed women faced conflicts in their extended familial relationships when practical or emotional support was needed. Unfortunately, these conflicts remained unresolved, and for some of them, it caused a greater distance or burnout in the relationship with their own or their partner’s siblings and parents.

FINANCIAL SECURITY, INDEPENDENCE, AND SELF-REALISATION

Family sociologist Martha McMahon (1995) emphasises that self-realisation in adult life is very important in Western society. However, the connection between motherhood and self-realisation is not clear. From her empirical research with full-time working mothers, she draws the conclusion that becoming a mother changed women’s identities. However, British sociologist Catherine Hakim (2003) points out that women should not be treated as a homogenous group. While analysing fertility decisions according to preferences, women are usually grouped as home-oriented,

work-oriented and adaptive, the latter organising their employment according to family policy and social circumstances (Hakim 2003). Family-friendly policies mainly focus on the third group of women, aiming to enhance fertility rates; however, some women's fertility decisions are less influenced by cultural norms or social policy (Maher 2005). Therefore, Maher suggests that perceiving motherhood as an activity rather than an identity minimises the social pressure mothers experience.

The theme of self-realisation was revealed in women's interviews while talking about their professional occupation, free-time activities and important events in their lives. Women were also asked how content they felt with their current life. A professional career was seen as key to self-realisation by most women. In some interviews the questions about education and work raised a long conversation about the importance of being employed as well as likes and dislikes in their previous or current occupation. For instance, for Inga (35), Norvilė (36), and Goda (31) being employed was an important aspect of independence. Inga stressed that she began to work when she was eighteen years old. Therefore, depending on her current husband's financial support while she studied in order to change her occupation made her feel uncomfortable. Her expectations to gain some profit soon reduced the discomfort. Goda (31) also stressed financial independence from her partner and sought to ensure some security for the future: "because today you have a husband, tomorrow he may not be there [...] you don't know. If your health fails or something else happens, you have to be able to do something."

Norvilė (36) stated that her professional life is more important to her well-being than having children. She experienced unemployment periods several times during recent years, and that lowered her self-esteem a lot. She stressed that not having children did not make her feel so low in comparison with not having a job: "I really don't feel good, but it's not related to the question of children [...] It is related to work, to employment, to earnings, in that sense, to income ... [...] I feel very insecure." Norvilė even doubted her ability to raise a child since she could not keep a job for a long period of time. On the one hand, she found reasonable explanations for not finding a suitable job in a smaller city, where she moved after marriage, in comparison with more successful periods of employment in the capital, where she lived before marriage. On the other hand, she remembered having good experiences of looking after children of friends and came to the idea of trying a nanny job, as being with children made her happy.

Working towards a PhD degree seemed to bring a sense of self-realisation as well. After spending many years in a job Dagnè (45) disliked, she decided to enter a PhD programme. At the time of the interview she was occupied with writing a dissertation and was living from savings. She described her satisfaction with her current situation: “although it’s not very logical when you’re sitting without work (laughs), but anyway ... It’s a subjective approach (laughs).”

Other women saw children who were not their own as a road to self-realisation. Virga (47) reflected on realising her emotional needs with nephews and nieces. Since youth she had sewn clothes for Barbie dolls as a hobby. As she had too little time to work with her younger sister’s dolls in the past, she now pursued her hobby of sewing for her niece’s dolls.

For some women, however, a successful career was not enough for self-realisation. While talking about her occupation, Neringa (35) described feeling content in her current job.⁵ As her salary was above the professional average, she found freedom in making choices in daily life. Still, recently Neringa realised that the gained freedom did not make her happy anymore. Therefore, she was considering having a child: “all those advantages do not bring a sense of joy that you have everything—you are not happy with those things, because you do not share them with anyone.”

Jobs and careers were also viewed by some women as things to achieve *before* having children. Being financially secure was also important for Monika (31) and Jorè (29). Jorè highlighted job security and related that to the decision to have a child: “If you don’t have a permanent job, some normal job, when you get a stable salary every month, [...] what will you do with that child. ... It is nonsense, you cannot make a normal daily routine for a child.” And Monika stressed the ability to provide for children financially, as she witnessed financial insecurity while living with a single mother in her teenage years. Still, having a child was perceived by Monika as a huge obligation that restricted independence, and she did not feel ready for that: “This obligation is every day [laughing], every week, every month for many years, and your life quality changes regarding trips, finances, where you put them, etc.”

Some women had other things they wanted to achieve before having children. For Grytè (29) and Toma (39), travelling was connected to independence and self-realisation. Grytè took long trips with her partner, and

⁵She invented her position by writing a well-financed project under the supervision of foreign leaders.

it was important for them to take a dream trip before having children. She agreed with her partner's statement that "when you have done everything in your life, you can plan for children, not because surroundings push you, but you want it yourself." Only then can a person enjoy parenting. Still, she was concerned about consequences to her fertility because of the postponement and set a timeframe of a couple of years. Toma (39) considered travelling as more important in her life than renovating a flat, which she bought eight years ago. Although some friends do not understand her choice, she keeps going on trips at least once a year: "it bothers people, how can you not manage [to do it] for so many years [...] everyone has different priorities. Some have said, for example, I wouldn't go anywhere until I tidied up my environment [...]. I choose to leave my place of residence for as long as I can and while my health allows me to go somewhere. I don't know what will happen next."

For most of the women in the study, self-realisation was closely linked to profession and occupation. The strong emphasis the woman put on being employed could be understood in the Lithuanian context. Scholars note that history and social norms of employment practices in the society form women's attitudes towards employment regardless of their motherhood status (Bernardi and Keim 2017). Therefore, Eastern European countries show higher rates of female employment in comparison with Western and Southern European countries, where a tradition of a male breadwinner and a partly working or stay-at-home mother were more widespread. Lithuanian women inherited a dual earner family model from the Soviet period and have one of the highest employment rates among women in Europe (Eurostat 2022). For the woman, having a job meant emotional and financial security, as well as independence from partners. It also provided the freedom to travel, even though this had a cost in other spheres in life. At the same time, employment was also viewed by some as a requirement before having children. The decision to have a child for some women who had partners was closely bound with employment status and stable financial resources, as it brought not only financial but also emotional security, allowing for future plans.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Non-motherhood is often studied from the perspective of causes and consequences (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka 2017; Peterson et al. 2011), and as a temporal stage in women's lives until they pass their reproductive age.

Cultural norms of motherhood as central to feminine identity have just recently begun to be questioned (Lebano and Jamieson 2020). Lithuania's pronatalist society can in part be traced to 1990, when, post-independence, the Catholic Church regained political power, influencing public discourse and family policy (Šumskaitė and Rapolienė 2019). Today, younger generations agree with more liberal statements that people should decide on motherhood by themselves; still, there is a belief that children bring meaning in life, more so for women than for men (Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė et al. 2019).

Most interviewed women had not questioned the reproductive temporality and heteronormative life path, which suggest that adult life should follow a normative life cycle—become an adult, create a family (by marrying a partner of the opposite sex), and have children (Halberstam 2005). Those women, who faced unwanted non-motherhood, kept trying for children. Others felt pressure to think about reproduction as central in their lives and created plans for how to fulfil it. Only those few women who were in their forties and were single for a long period of their adult life felt more comfortable with their non-motherhood status, as they perceived solo-motherhood in a negative way. They stated that reproduction should happen only in married heterosexual relationships. Only one interviewee openly confronted reproduction and living in partnership as the foundations of a woman's life. She found an alternative inner satisfaction in her life.

Even though reproduction remained central in the women's lives, for most of them family meant more than nuclear family. Despite heteronormative values in society, women valued extended family networks, which were the sources of emotional and practical support. Some women thought of relationships with relatives as living in a community. To keep up with relationships in extended familial networks was important not only for single women but also for those living in partnerships. Therefore, the interviews suggested that despite pronatalist norms, family may have broader and more inclusive meanings.

Profession, occupation, and employment status were important for women's self-esteem, feelings of independence and financial security. One of the explanations for parenthood becoming less attractive is perceiving parenthood as a duty and focusing on individual self-realisation goals and couple relationships (Schneider 2010). To have a breadwinning partner was not enough to feel secure financially or to plan for children, and for single women, income from work was the main means of securing

independent living and fulfilling desires such as travelling. Lithuanian families' dependency on the labour market can also be explained by a lack of state financial support for bringing up children, as the main focus of family policy remains on paid parental leave, which depends on a woman's previous employment. Benefits levels remain low and other family support measures are less developed (Steinbach and Maslauskaitė 2022). That could explain the crucial importance of employment to women's feelings of current and future financial and emotional security. For some of them, only stable employment and financial security allowed them to consider reproduction.

The qualitative interviews demonstrated that reproduction was seen as central in women's lives. Only a few women felt comfortable with not having children. Others negotiated with themselves about the timeframe for trying for biological children and other alternatives like adoption, becoming a stepmother or being a single mother by choice. Finally, even those women who were at the end of their reproductive age and did not have any plans to try for children in the near future hadn't talked about a final decision to live without children. This indicates that pressure for motherhood remains strong, and experiences of non-motherhood do not yet hold sufficient weight to demonstrate an alternative path for a happy life.

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