

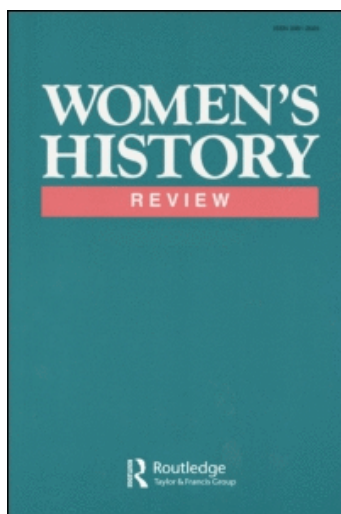
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# Changing Notions of Lone Motherhood in Twentieth-Century Finland

Vanessa May

*Through written life stories of lone mothers, this article examines changes in lone motherhood in twentieth-century Finland. While the older life-story writers' narratives are clearly influenced by an 'ethos of survival' and the regulation of female sexuality, the younger writers relate their experiences with the help of scripts on gender equality and the psychological importance of 'good' parenting. These narrative shifts point to important changes in cultural scripts on women's positions in families, on the labour market, and in society.*

## Introduction

This article examines changes in the social phenomenon of lone motherhood in twentieth-century Finland by analysing written life stories of lone mothers from different generations and interpreting these against changing cultural scripts on gender, family and work.<sup>1</sup> In the study of lone mothers' circumstances and lives, Finland presents a special case because of women's relatively strong positions within families and the labour market. Furthermore, Finland underwent a rapid process of industrialisation and urbanisation after the Second World War, coupled with the development of a Nordic-style welfare state.

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The cultural script of Finnish lone motherhood is integrally linked with the development of Finland as an independent state in the twentieth century. The category 'lone mother' tends to be used to exemplify not only the effects of the gradual expansion of the Finnish welfare state, but also of the development of gender equality and the resulting relatively good position that Finnish women enjoy in society.<sup>2</sup> Lone motherhood is thus in Finnish discussions often proudly used to exemplify the positive results of 'progressive' gender politics.

Popular images of lone motherhood underwent clear shifts in Finland over the century. Lone motherhood was a politicised class issue in the early twentieth century—the image of the 'typical' lone mother was that of the working-class unmarried mother.<sup>3</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, lone motherhood was partly regarded through the prism of the Second World War and lone mothers were perceived as either heroic war widows or 'fallen' single mothers.<sup>4</sup> In contemporary debates, the 'typical' lone mother is a divorced working mother, while lone motherhood has ceased to be a politicised issue. Reflecting this, lone motherhood has not attracted the same academic interest as it has in the English-speaking academic community.<sup>5</sup> However, there are also psychological discourses visible in Finland that do problematise one-parent families from a child development perspective.<sup>6</sup>

To explore how the changing patterns in gender relations, family life and social policy have been reflected in the lives of lone mothers I draw on seventeen life stories written by Finnish lone mothers. The life stories originate from a life-story collection called 'Women's Lives in Swedish-Speaking Finland' (Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland), initiated in 1995 by the Women's Studies Institute at Åbo Akademi University. The archive houses a total of 130 life stories. Written life stories are a popular source for research in Finland, and universities across the country have hosted a number of life-history collections and competitions.<sup>7</sup> These life-story collections usually succeed in attracting life stories from people with a range of social and educational backgrounds.<sup>8</sup>

From the 130 life stories archived at Åbo Akademi University, I chose those written by women who said that they had at some point in their lives been lone mothers—seventeen in total. Not all of the writers used this terminology, so I defined 'lone mother' as a woman who alone had been responsible for the upbringing of her children, without the help of an adult partner. These women were either widows, separated/divorced, or had not been in a relationship when their child was born.

Of the seventeen life-story writers, the oldest was born in the 1910s and the youngest in the 1960s. The life stories cover experiences of lone motherhood from the 1940s to 1995 (see Tables 1 and 3 in the sections below). The writers' social and educational backgrounds vary from a poor agrarian background with only a basic education to a middle-class background with a university education (see Tables 2 and 4 below). All of the writers have been employed either in agriculture or in the labour market for most of their adult lives.

In the following sections I examine how the life-story writers in my study narrated their experiences of lone motherhood. I seek contextualised explanations

for the distinct differences between the accounts of those who became lone mothers in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, and those who became lone mothers in the 1970s or later. While the older writers focus on how hard it was to financially support their children and on the stigma they faced, the younger women write about their independence and their children's psychological well-being. These differences reflect the changing cultural scripts on gender, motherhood and work in twentieth-century Finland.

**The Older Writers: harsh living conditions and unforgiving moral norms**

I first turn to the life stories of the older writers who grew up in the first part of the twentieth century and became lone mothers during the 1940s, 50s and 1960s (see Table 1). These women discuss their experiences of lone motherhood mainly through two issues: the hard work they have had to perform in order to support their children financially and the shame and stigma they have endured as a result of their lone motherhood.<sup>9</sup>

These concerns mirror the two main foci of the public debates around lone motherhood during the first half of the twentieth century in Finland, namely poverty and morality. Lone motherhood at this time was mainly discussed in terms of unmarried motherhood, which was defined as a working-class phenomenon, and the debates tended to be split along class lines. In parliament, for example, unmarried mothers were explicitly considered a moral problem by the bourgeois parties but were defended by those on the left. Left-wing female parliamentarians in particular pushed for legislation to improve the living conditions and increase the rights of lone mothers and their children.<sup>10</sup> These politicians focused mainly on child welfare, their main concerns being the high number of orphans left in the wake of the civil war in 1919, as well as fears over a possible labour shortage.<sup>11</sup> There were thus two opposing cultural scripts on lone motherhood at work. The first one presented lone mothers as a moral problem, but was tempered by a script

**Table 1** The older life-story writers according to age, and when and how they became lone mothers

Pseudonym	Born	When became lone mother	Route into lone motherhood
Sofia	1910s	1940s	Divorced
Edit	1910s	1940s	Divorced
Emma	1910s	1940s	Divorced
Sylvia	1910s	1. 1940s 2. 1950s	Single; Widowed
Maria	1910s	1950s	Widowed
Anna	1920s	1960s	Widowed
Elisabet	1920s	1940s	Single
Karolin	1920s	1950s	Divorced
Iris	1930s	1. 1950s 2. 1950s	Divorced; Single

that was concerned with a population crisis, according to which every child was a valuable resource whose survival must be ensured.

Finland was up until the late 1950s/early 1960s a relatively poor agrarian country.<sup>12</sup> Therefore it is not surprising that the narratives of the older life-story writers are dominated by tales of harsh living conditions and the precariousness of existence, exacerbated by their lone motherhood. These women highlight that they did not take their financial survival for granted, and emphasise what a struggle it was for them to provide their children with life's basic needs:

He [my ex-husband] never came to see his son, he has never paid anything for him, I have worked and drugged, and with my parents' help it has been manageable. (Iris, divorced in 1950s)

In the autumn of 1946 I arrived in [town] with two small children—[my son] was then 2 years old and [my daughter] a baby. Besides a small travel bag this was all I owned. ... My main goal in life, just then, was to survive—to support my children. ... Finding a job that would support us soon became my main goal. ... Only jobs that offered housing came into question for me. (Emma, divorced in 1940s)

It is important to note that none of these life-story writers question work itself or state that they would rather have been at home with their children. Most of the older writers are from a working-class background and therefore could not realistically expect to be 'housewives' (see Table 2).<sup>13</sup>

These writers were by no means unusual lone mothers in their time—lone mothers in Finland have traditionally worked in order to support their children.<sup>14</sup> Their work has been normalised through the cultural script that emphasises women's ability to work—indeed Finnish women were traditionally not evaluated on their 'femininity' or on their sexual attractiveness as much as on their ability to perform physical labour.<sup>15</sup> Although there is some debate among researchers as to what extent this perception reflects an actual gender equality in the division of labour in agrarian Finland,<sup>16</sup> it is, however, probably safe to say that there is in Finland a history of depicting women as capable workers as well as wives and mothers.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 2** The older life-story writers by education and occupation

Pseudonym	Education	Occupation
Sofia	Basic	Blue-collar
Edit	Basic	Blue-collar
Emma	Higher	White-collar
Sylvia	Vocational	White-collar
Maria	Vocational	Blue-collar
Anna	Basic	Blue-collar
Elisabet	Basic	Blue-collar/Agrarian
Karolin	Higher	White-collar
Iris	Basic	Blue-collar/Agrarian

However, the general perception of Finnish women as workers at that time was not based on an attempt to promote gender equality, but was rather necessitated by the fact that Finland remained for long (until the 1950s and 60s) a poor agrarian country where the labour of every able-bodied person was invaluable.<sup>18</sup> In such a context, women's labour input has traditionally been important.<sup>19</sup> This remained true also during Finland's accelerated industrialisation process after the Second World War. The need for workers in the new industries and the growing service sector in the 1950s and 60s meant that increasing numbers of women entered the new labour markets.<sup>20</sup>

The harsh material and financial conditions under which the older life-story writers brought up their children were dictated not only by the general poor standard of living in the country at the time, but also by their class. Most of the older writers are from relatively poor backgrounds with no access to family money, education or well-paying jobs (see Table 2). In a country where few men were able to earn a 'family wage', this was even less possible for women. As the life stories of the older writers show, this created problems for those women who had to bring up their children on their own wage alone. Many of them had to find more than one source of income, and even those with just one job had to work long hours to bring enough food to the table:

Here at home my existence had caved in There was no money Odd jobs every now and again I spun thread from wool for those in the neighbourhood. One's own wool was the only thing that existed for clothes Besides which the winters were cold. Hundreds of kilos of wool went through my hands At 29 my hair started turning grey around the temples. (Edit, divorced mother in the 1940s)

One consequence of this heavy workload mentioned by the writers is that they had less time for their children, which they felt had repercussions on the quality of their parenting:

They [my children] have had to face life's seriousness too early and bring each other up, when I started working in earnest. (Maria, widowed in 1950s)

Also Karolin, who divorced in the 1950s, makes a similar point about how she had less time to keep an eye on her children while she was juggling work and her studies, saying that she hoped that her children 'did not get into trouble'. For the older writers, their main task as lone mothers was to act as providers—the caring aspects of parenting came second out of necessity.

Not only were these women wanting to feed and clothe their children, but they also talk about their aim to provide their children with a better start to life than they themselves had enjoyed. This required a good education, which at the time in Finland was not free. The sense of pride these women feel over their achievements is palpable:

When I look back at my life I often wonder how I managed everything, all my children graduated from high school and started life without study loans. At that time it was possible to work overtime, countless nights I came home at 2 o'clock at night, in order to sleep barely 2 hours, soon after 5 I had to be on my way to my own shift. Today this is forbidden. (Anna, widowed in the 1960s)

These narratives of financial survival fit in with the general ‘ethos of survival’ against harsh odds that has been attributed to older generations of Finns.<sup>21</sup> Those born in the early twentieth century tend to view life as a series of hardships, the survival of which necessitates hard work and self-sacrifice. Older generations of Finns have been found to construct their life stories around these hardships and the sacrifices they have had to make in order to survive, and the pride they feel in having accomplished this.<sup>22</sup> This perhaps explains why although the older life-story writers in the present study do not question their need to work as such, they do highlight the quantity of work they have had to undertake in order to ensure their children’s material well-being.

### Experiencing Stigma

The second theme running through the life stories of the older writers is that of the stigma they faced from family and community members. The detailed nature of these accounts (who said what and where, and the effect this had on the writer) perhaps gives some indication as to the significance of these experiences and the pain they continued to cause the writers even decades later.

Historically, the number of widows and unmarried mothers was relatively high among the poor agrarian population in Finland,<sup>23</sup> but the degree to which unmarried mothers were accepted in rural communities varied from region to region. In some, giving birth to a child out of wedlock was a scandal that could ruin the mother’s life and leave her with little chance of ever marrying, while elsewhere extra-marital sex was the norm and an unmarried mother had no difficulties getting married, because she had proven her fertility and had produced valuable future farm workers.<sup>24</sup> Although Finland did show some ‘progressive’ leanings early on with regard to women’s rights and family law,<sup>25</sup> extra-marital sexual relationships and cohabitation remained frowned upon until after the Second World War. For example, attempts to legislate against extra-marital cohabitation were not abandoned until 1940.<sup>26</sup>

It is against this backdrop that the accounts of the older life-story writers are to be interpreted. They detail the moral censure they experienced either as children of unmarried mothers, or as unmarried and divorced mothers themselves. Elisabet, who was born an ‘unwelcome child’ in the 1920s to an unmarried, working-class mother, says that it was shameful to be illegitimate, and that she was often called a ‘child of a whore’. Elisabet refers to her experiences as a child when she describes how she felt when she found out she was pregnant—and unmarried:

The situation I had landed in felt unbearable and extremely confusing. Where could I go????? This was exactly what I had planned to avoid. I knew how it had been for my mother and had early on decided that it would not happen to me. Still at that time the shame of being an unmarried mother was greater than the practical problems one faced.

Iris, who was already divorced with one child, gave birth to an illegitimate child in the 1950s. In her life story she details her mother’s disapproval and harsh treatment of her, but Iris also indicates that she might share her mother’s values:



I know that mother was ashamed of me, she said so several times, and I understand why. (Iris, single mother in the 1950s)

Like Elisabet, Iris had nowhere to escape from under the glare of such condemnation. As a woman from a poor agrarian family with little education she had few prospects of supporting herself and her illegitimate baby. She was reliant on her parents for food and housing, and therefore had little choice but to endure her mother's punitive treatment:

When I came home [from the maternity ward] mother said that I should rather not go out and show myself, and if anyone came to visit mother and father I had to stay in the bedroom and be as quiet as possible, also the baby. ... I was allowed to go out with my little daughter but only behind the house where no one could see us. (Iris, single mother in the 1950s)

In addition to accelerating Finland's industrialisation and urbanisation process, the Second World War also had its effect on the popular images of lone motherhood. The class dimension, which for long had been a strong element in popular debates around lone motherhood, lost some of its importance.<sup>27</sup> For the first time, lone mothers of all backgrounds were united in the image of the heroic war widow. However, there were also tales of the 'fallen' women who had 'taken advantage' of the opportunities the war had provided in relaxing sexual behaviour and had become pregnant with an illegitimate child.<sup>28</sup> It was, however, not only unmarried mothers who faced stigma—also divorce was at this time unusual and resulted in gossip and disapproval. Emma describes the suspicion with which she was treated by the small community she moved to after her divorce in the 1940s:

Also here there were of course already war widows with children—one or more. But one knew nothing about me. Is she a war widow or divorced?? Female heads of household were extremely unusual. (Emma, divorced in the 1940s)

Emma talks of being the focus for much gossip and negative attention, which at times was filtered to her through her children:

Through my son I also realised another unpleasant thing. When adults do not dare ask someone directly, they often make use of their children. I don't think this is 'fair play' [*sic*]. One beautiful day he came in and told me what a much older boy had said, 'they say your mother is divorced'. He did not even know what the word meant. (Emma, divorced in the 1940s)

Karolin, who divorced in the 1950s, recounts the vocal disapproval that others expressed over her marital status:

But all one could do was grit one's teeth, hold one's head up and ignore all the old ladies who talked, at times they even had to hiss to each other audibly, 'There she comes, you know,' and then they said my name. ... Now after 40 years one can smile, but then I just wanted to die. But one cannot leave 3 children and one cannot take them with one either. Divorce at that time was a scandal.

These accounts tell of a time when women's moral worth was closely tied in with their marital status and notions of sexual 'decency'. The regulation of female



sexuality was such that unmarried women tended to be viewed with suspicion, while unmarried or divorced women with children were met with strict moral censure. The older life-story writers evoke images of women who were made highly visible in their communities because of their deviation from the norm. This visibility in turn made them vulnerable to scrutiny and stigma.

### A Woman's Right to Independence

I now turn to the life stories written by the younger life-story writers, who were born in the 1940s or later, and who became lone mothers from the 1970s onwards (see Table 3). The main shifts in relation to lone motherhood in post-war Finland had to do with the increasing visibility of gender equality discourses, rising divorce rates, the liberalisation of sexual mores, and the professionalisation of parenting.<sup>29</sup> These changes are reflected in the issues that the younger lone mothers raise when discussing their lone motherhood. They focus on the disadvantages and benefits that being single has had for them as individuals, and defend a woman's right to be a lone mother. They also discuss the psychological aspects of parenting, mainly in the form of their fears over the potential harm done to their children by growing up with only one parent.

Stigma does cast its shadow on the life stories of the younger women as well, but with different effect. The older writers describe having nowhere to escape and the shame they themselves have felt as a result of the disapproval they faced as lone mothers. Most of them were working on farms in small agrarian communities and their only option would have been to move to a similar community, where they probably would have been similarly stigmatised. The younger writers, it would seem, have had different options open to them. Most of the younger writers are relatively well-educated women who have benefited from the increased social mobility afforded by urbanisation and the expansion of the service sector (see Table 4). For example, Gunilla, who became a single mother in the 1970s, chose to move to a larger town in order to escape the negative scrutiny she was placed under in her small home town: 'But the town was so small and everybody was talking about me so I wanted to move'.

**Table 3** The younger life-story writers according to age, and when and how they became lone mothers

Pseudonym	Born	When became lone mother	Route into lone motherhood
Astrid	1940s	1970s	Divorced
Ellen	1940s	1980s	Divorced
Ulla	1940s	1980s	Divorced
Cecilia	1940s	1980s	Divorced
Barbro	1940s	1980s	Single
Susanna	1940s	1980s	Divorced
Gunilla	1950s	1970s	Single
Katarina	1960s	1980s	Single

**Table 4** The younger life-story writers by education and occupation

Pseudonym	Education	Occupation
Astrid	Basic	Unknown
Ellen	Higher	Unknown
Ulla	Higher	White-collar
Cecilia	Unknown	Blue-collar
Barbro	Higher	White-collar
Susanna	Higher	White-collar
Gunilla	Unknown	White-collar
Katarina	Higher	Unknown

The younger writers had also other *moral* options open to them. Whereas the older writers do not question the mores that accounted for their stigmatisation, the younger writers do not accept the moral censure they may have been targeted with. Instead, they show a degree of defiance, defending their right to be a lone mother. Katarina tells of her fight to be accepted as a lone mother, indicating that she has experienced attempts at stigmatising her:

It took a while before mother's love awoke, but when it did, I became a lioness of a mother, I fought for my right to be accepted as a lone mother. (Katarina, single mother in the 1990s)

Barbro is also quite explicit in her defence of her lone motherhood, again indicating that she has come across people 'who make a big deal out of it':

Being a lone mother has never been a problem and I don't understand people who make a big deal out of it. Of course there have been times when one would have benefited from having someone to share problems with but if one knows from the start that one is alone one manages. (Barbro, single mother in the 1980s)

What is also different in the younger writers' accounts is that, unlike the older writers, they do not provide detailed accounts of how this disapproval has been voiced or who has 'made a big deal out of it'. Perhaps the censure they meet is of a more diffuse nature than that experienced by the older writers, and rather than having a number of specific instances to recount, the younger writers are aware of a *general* sense that lone motherhood is not fully acceptable.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas some of the older writers describe the aspersions that were cast on their respectability because they did not have a male partner, the younger writers focus on 'being single' as an opportunity for personal growth. Cecilia lists the things she has been free to do since the end of her oppressive marriage:

That is when I gradually realised, how wonderful freedom was. The freedom, that every person should have, even when she is married, I had not been able to enjoy in many, many years. I could now go to the market on a Saturday morning and stay there for as long as I liked. I could travel, I could go dancing, I could buy a bottle of beer or two, most of all I could meet whomever I wanted. (Cecilia, divorced in the 1980s)

These new moral spaces that are available for the younger writers are the result of the noticeable shift in mores around women's sexuality that have taken place from the 1960s onwards. As in other western industrialised countries, industrialisation and urbanisation were in Finland accompanied by a liberalisation of general attitudes on sexual behaviour and divorce. Women began to question whether marriage was the only way of legitimising their sexuality and motherhood. During the 1960s, the belief that a 'destructive' marriage should end became more widespread and divorce legislation was changed in 1988, introducing no-fault divorce and making the process faster and easier.<sup>31</sup> Not only have an increasing number of couples decided to end their marriage, but also cohabitation has grown in popularity since the 1970s.<sup>32</sup>

As a result of these changes, the typical lone mother in public debates has become the divorced or separated mother, while unmarried motherhood has ceased to be the focus of popular concern. Although some argue that there no longer is any significant stigma attached to being a lone mother, general attitudes continue to favour the traditional nuclear family as the best environment in which to bring up children.<sup>33</sup>

These changes in gender relations and in the regulation of women's sexuality took place at the same time as women were cementing their place in the labour market. This is reflected in another major difference between the older and the younger life-story writers in this study; that is, the younger writers' superior financial position. Most of them are university educated with relatively well-paying jobs, making it easier for them to support their children financially (see Table 4). Ulla, who divorced in the 1980s, points to this generational difference between women when she compares her situation with that of her mother, whom Ulla believes endured an unhappy marriage because she had no other alternative financially speaking:

I witnessed my parents living in an unhappy marriage largely due to my father's alcoholism, which influenced the whole family. There were innumerable occasions when I thought that were I in my mother's situation I would take the children and move away, and get a divorce. But mother did not have the financial prerequisites to support a family of four, which she probably would have had to do, because all of father's money would have been spent on alcohol after that.

Financial autonomy and its advantages is a strong theme running through the life stories of the younger women. For example Ellen and Ulla draw attention to their achievement in being able to provide a good home and stability for their children:

I felt an indescribable happiness over my home, I felt pride over the fact that I had been able to create something permanent for the two of us. When we moved [to our new home] I had at last put a stop to the sorrows and worries of before. Besides which I felt that I had made the right choice when I had chosen to live alone with the boy. (Ellen, divorced in the 1980s)

I was grateful that I was in a situation where divorce was possible practically and financially. I had a job with a good salary and managed well financially. I was also glad that I so quickly found us an apartment in the same part of town where we

lived, so that the children did not immediately have to change schools and day-care centres. (Ulla, divorced in the 1980s)

The younger women's educational and occupational careers reflect the social changes that occurred in the latter part of the twentieth century. The 1960s mark a watershed in Finnish society, when the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation reached their peak and were coupled with a significant expansion of the welfare state.<sup>34</sup> In the post-war period, as a result of women's increased wage working, the implicit Finnish gender contract was defined to encompass 'working motherhood'.<sup>35</sup> Women have also played an active role in the developing of the Finnish welfare state, which no doubt has contributed to the number of 'women-friendly' family policies that the younger writers will have benefited from. One of the main aims of family policy has been to make the combining of work and childcare easier, and this, together with Finnish lone mothers' high work rates, have had a positive impact on lone mothers' financial positions.

The gendered cultural scripts have also shifted to allow women to regard themselves as individuals in addition to the more traditional relational understandings of women as 'mothers' or 'wives'.<sup>36</sup> Contemporary Finnish women have discursive spaces to talk of themselves as separate from their children and (male) partners, with rightful individual interests beyond those connected to their family status.

The notion of gender equality is central in the 'cultural scripts' on what it means to be a Finnish woman.<sup>37</sup> Yet feminist researchers highlight the many important aspects in which gender equality has not been accomplished, both on the labour market<sup>38</sup> and in the home.<sup>39</sup> The case of lone mothers, the litmus test for the actual gender equality in a society,<sup>40</sup> shows that in Finland, gender inequality continues to affect the lives of lone mothers, partly due to the gender-segregated labour market. For example, lone-mother families in Finland are poorer on average than two-parent families and the economic recession in Finland in the 1990s hit lone parents harder than two-parent families.<sup>41</sup>

The younger women's accounts of lone motherhood reflect the important social shifts that have occurred in Finland, which have opened up new practical, financial and moral spaces for women. Women's sexuality is no longer so tightly regulated through heterosexual marriage, providing lone mothers with the language to defend their motherhood. This, together with increased chances of financial autonomy, has enabled a new kind of lone motherhood to emerge, one that is proudly independent. Yet Finnish lone mothers' lives continue to also be marked by disapproval and gender inequality.

### **The New Worry: children's psychological well-being**

The younger lone mothers' tales of autonomy and independence are, however, tempered by the writers' concerns over their children's psychological well-being, particularly with regard to growing up 'without a father'. This is an aspect not mentioned by the older life-story writers, who discuss the quality of their mothering in terms of their success in providing for their children materially and being

short of time to bring their children up ‘properly’. Yet they examine the effects of the latter not through a psychological but rather a disciplinary perspective. Neither do the older writers consider the father as a carer, but rather in terms of an absent financial provider. This shift can partly be attributed to the increasing popularity of psychological theories of development that have spread into general discourse since the 1950s.<sup>42</sup> Thus, ideas of the importance of a ‘male role model’ and of children’s need for two parents in order to grow up in a ‘healthy’ manner are now commonplace in people’s understandings of what constitutes a ‘good’ childhood—as reflected in the life stories of the younger women.

This view is also visible in the developments in social policy and family law, particularly since the 1970s. The focus of policy makers has shifted over time from the morality of lone mothers to the well-being of their children. Attention has increasingly been directed to the rights of the child in relation to *both* parents: the right to receive financial support, a good education, and a healthy standard of living.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, notions of what constitutes children’s well-being have broadened to encompass the quality of relationships.<sup>44</sup>

The cultural scripts around fatherhood have also been shifting, which in turn has impacted on how motherhood is understood. The emergence of the so-called ‘new father’ has brought with it an increasing emphasis on fathers’ significance not only as financial providers but also as carers with an important emotional relationship with their children.<sup>45</sup> This has, however, not lessened the importance of mothering. On the contrary, one could argue that the ‘new fatherhood’ has resulted in added responsibilities for mothers, who continue to be regarded as ultimately responsible for their children’s well-being.<sup>46</sup> For example, while ‘shared custody’ has become the ideal arrangement, supported, for example, by the legal and social policy institutions, one of the main foci in public debates around lone motherhood in Finland is the issue of the relationship between the non-residential father and the children.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the contemporary cultural script prescribes that children’s well-being is best ensured if they have an ongoing relationship with both their parents.

It would seem that these changes have had important consequences for lone mothers—an ‘absent’ father is now a potential threat to a child’s psychological well-being, and any adverse effects risk being interpreted as the mother’s ‘fault’. This seems to be the cultural script that the younger life-story writers engage with. These women indicate that they have been aware of and carefully considered the potential risks facing their children:

Would I be hurting him [my son] by removing his father, by denying him daily contact with his father, a man? I knew beforehand that my son would not see much of his father. I had no one in my little family who could act as ‘make-believe father’, making it impossible for me to provide a male role model for my son. Would I manage to provide a varied enough childhood for a child, a boy, as a lone mother? I realised that this would be a problem. (Ellen, divorced in the 1980s)

Ulla acknowledges that the ‘lack of a male role model’ has made life harder for her children:

Life has surely not always felt so easy for them; the divorce and the lack of a male role model has affected them. (Ulla, divorced in the 1980s)

A perceived escalation of children's 'ill-being' (as opposed to well-being) in the form of increased use of alcohol and drugs, antisocial behaviour and mental health problems has also been the focus of public debate in Finland, and one-parent families are mentioned as one of the possible causes for these signs of 'ill-being'.<sup>48</sup> In light of such powerful cultural scripts it is not surprising that the younger writers spend some time on trying to convince the reader that they have done their best in alleviating any possible harm done to their children. Part of the function of telling personal accounts is presenting a morally acceptable self.<sup>49</sup> An 'ethical' person, when faced with a moral problem such as these writers, must show that they are aware of and have taken into consideration the ethical implications of their actions.<sup>50</sup> Part of acting ethically is also acting in such a way as to prevent unnecessary harm—this is especially true when it comes to parents.<sup>51</sup> Thus the younger writers in the present study seem to want to say that in the absence of a father, they have tried to be as good a mother as possible:

The most important thing to me was that I gave my children safety, was present physically and psychologically. I always answered their questions and dressed them nicely. I allowed them to dirty their clothes, if they were having fun, and did not want to interrupt their games. In the evenings I tried to study parenting, attended courses and gathered information . . . . I so wanted to be a good mother, so that the children would feel that they were loved. In fact I think that I succeeded in this quite well. (Cecilia, divorced in the 1980s)

To show that their efforts to counteract any potential harm have been successful, the younger lone mothers also recount the praise they have received from professionals, for example, teachers. In the era of professionalised parenting, who better to provide such testimonials:

His openness has held. He continues to be sociable by nature, and there appears to be nothing wrong with his self-confidence, for the teachers both at school and at the music school say that he is an intelligent and harmonious boy with good self-confidence. (Ellen, divorced in the 1980s)

It is clear that these women are operating under gendered cultural scripts on parenting. The new element in the younger writers' life stories is the emergence of father as a caring *parent* as well as a focus on children's psychological well-being. The younger writers account for the ways in which they have tried to ensure their children's psychological development. They also express feelings of responsibility over the father-child relationship, even though they themselves are no longer in a relationship with the father.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how changes in general perceptions of lone motherhood and in individual lone mothers' experiences are linked to changing gender relations in Finland. These have been driven by processes of urbanisation and

industrialisation, the development of the welfare state and changes in sexual mores. The older lone mothers, who experienced lone motherhood at a time when general standards of living were relatively poor in Finland, and who were mainly from poor backgrounds themselves, depicted lone motherhood as hard work and stigmatising. The younger women, who have clearly benefited from women's improved positions in society, depict lone motherhood not only as hard work but also as a time of possible autonomy and growth and resist attempts to place stigma on their lone motherhood.

Gender is central in understanding how lone motherhood is viewed and experienced. There has in Finland traditionally been an emphasis on women as workers, which allows lone mothers space to define themselves unquestioningly as providers. Improved standards of living and women's improved positions in the labour market are, however, reflected in the differences in what work signifies to the older and younger writers. While the older writers portray work as drudgery, for the more affluent and better educated younger writers work is meaningful and important for their sense of autonomy. The financially and morally independent lives depicted by the younger writers have also been made possible by changes in sexual mores and new cultural scripts allowing women to portray themselves as individuals with rightful independent needs. The liberalisation of sexual mores is also reflected in the differences in how the lone mothers account for and deal with the stigma they have encountered. While the older writers tell tales of shame and being trapped, the younger writers have space to defy attempts to stigmatise their family form, while the stigma they describe seems of a more diffuse nature.<sup>52</sup> Not all developments, however, have had a positive effect on the lives of lone mothers: discourses around the 'new fatherhood' and the potential psychological harm that children can suffer when growing up in a lone-mother family are obviously problematic for the younger writers. This is perhaps the new form of stigma that contemporary lone mothers face—as women whose children pay the price for their mother's right to assert their autonomy.

## Notes

- [1] In telling narratives about their lives people invariably make use of shared cultural resources such as narrative frameworks and cultural scripts that offer guidelines as to how a person 'should' be. Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) *Narrative Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage).
- [2] Minna Rantalaiho (unpublished manuscript) *Yksinhuoltajuus ja yhteiskuntamuutos: Aviottomasta äitiydestä jaettuun vanhemmuuteen*.
- [3] Ritva Nätkin (1991) *Familj, klass och kön i välfärdsstaten*, in Panu Pulma (Ed.) *Den problematiska familjen* (Helsingfors: Suomen Historiallinen Seura).
- [4] Ritva Nätkin (1997) *Kamppailu suomalaisesta äitiydestä. Maternalismi, väestöpolitiikka ja naisten kertomukset* (Tampere: Gaudeamus); Kaarina Jousimaa (1983) *'Jokainen lapsi on pelastettava elämälle'—Avioton äiti ja lapsi suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa* (Helsinki: Federation of Mother and Child Homes).
- [5] Vanessa May (1999) *Work and Financial Survival in the Life Stories of Finnish Lone Mothers: complicating the existing research narrative on the financial aspects of lone motherhood* (Ser. A: 504) (Åbo: Department of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Åbo Akademi University).



- [6] Vanessa May (2003) Lone Motherhood Past and Present: the life stories of Finnish lone mothers, *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 11, pp. 27–39.
- [7] J. P. Roos (1987) *Suomalainen elämä: Tutkimus tavallisten suomalaisten elämäkertoista* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura); Anni Vilkkö (1997) *Omaelämäkerta kohtaamispaikkana: Naisen elämän kerronta ja luenta* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura).
- [8] Literacy levels are high and writing is a popular hobby in Finland. Vilkkö, *Omaelämäkerta kohtaamispaikkana*. See Gunilla Sand (1998) Kvinnoliv i Svenskfinland—ett tvärsnitt av materialet, in Harriet Silius, Ann-Catrin Östman & Kristin Mattsson (Eds) *I dialog med kvinnoliv* (no. 11) (Åbo: Institute of Women's Studies, Åbo Akademi University) for details of the Kvinnoliv collection.
- [9] These accounts were written in 1995 and are therefore inevitably to some degree shaped not only by the past experiences of the writers but also by their personal circumstances and social context at the time of writing. However, the fact that the two cohorts of writers present such different accounts of lone motherhood indicates that there is some difference in their original experiences as well and that their understanding of their lone motherhood is to some degree influenced by the social/historical context in which it was experienced.
- [10] Nätkin, 'Familj, klass och kön'; Jousimaa, 'Jokainen lapsi'; Irma Sulkunen (1990) The Mobilisation of Women and the Birth of Civil Society, in Merja Manninen & Päivi Setälä (Eds) *The Lady with the Bow* (Helsinki: Otava).
- [11] David Bradley (1998) The Antecedents of Finnish Family Laws: legal tradition, political culture and social institutions, *Journal of Legal History*, 19, pp. 93–115.
- [12] Raija Julkunen (1994) Suomalainen sukupuolimalli—1960-luku käänteenä, in Anneli Anttonen, Lea Henriksson & Ritva Nätkin (Eds) *Naisten hyvinvointivaltio* (Tampere: Vastapaino).
- [13] Nätkin, *Kamppailu suomalaisesta äitiydestä*; Vuokko Aromaa (1990) Tyttöikä—tuulenpyörre ja tosipaikka, in Kari Immonen (Ed.) *Naisen elämä. Mistä on pienet tytöt tehty, mistä tyttöjen äidit* (Keuruu: Otava); Beatrice Moring (2002) Widowhood Options and Strategies in Preindustrial Northern Europe: socioeconomic differences in household position of the widowed in 18th and 19th century Finland, *History of the Family*, 7, pp. 79–99; Pirjo Markkola (1994) *Työläiskodin synty. Tamperelaiset työläisperheet ja yhteiskunnallinen kysymys 1870-luvulta 1910-luvulle* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura); Raija Julkunen (1999) Gender, Work, Welfare State, in Päivi Lipponen & Päivi Setälä (Eds) *Women in Finland* (Helsinki: Otava).
- [14] May, *Work and Financial Survival*.
- [15] Ibid; Jaana Kuusipalo (1999) Finnish Women in Politics, in Lipponen & Päivi, *Women in Finland*.
- [16] Moring, 'Widowhood Options and Strategies'; Ann-Catrin Östman (2000) *Mjolk och jor: Om kvinnlighet, manlighet och arbete i ett österbottniskt jordbrukssamhälle ca. 1870–1940* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press); Tiina Silvasti (2003) Bending Borders of Gendered Labour Division on Farms: the case of Finland, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 43, pp. 154–166; Kirsti Niskanen (2001) Gender Economics in Action: rural women's economic citizenship in Finland during the twentieth century, *Journal of Women's History*, 13, pp. 132–152.
- [17] Kuusipalo, 'Finnish Women in Politics'.
- [18] Niskanen, 'Gender Economics in Action'; Julkunen, 'Gender, Work, Welfare State'.
- [19] Moring, 'Widowhood Options and Strategies'.
- [20] Erkki Pihkala (1986) Sopeutuminen rauhaan, in Erkki Pihkala (Ed.) *Teollisuus-Suomi 1945–1980* (Helsinki: Tammi); Arvo Peltonen (1982) *Suomen kaupunkijärjestelmän kasvu 1815–1970: Teollistumisen vaikutuksia perifeerisen maan kaupungistumiseen* (Helsinki: Societas scientiarum Fennica).

- [21] Roos, *Suomalainen elämä*; Matti Kortteinen (1992) *Kunnian kenttä: Suomalainen palkkatyö kulttuurisena muotona* (Hämeenlinna: Hanki ja Jää).
- [22] Roos, *Suomalainen elämä*; Kortteinen, *Kunnian kenttä*; Harriet Strandell (1984) Kolmen naissukupolven kokemuksia työstä ja perheestä, in Elina Haavio-Mannila, Riitta Jallinoja & Harriet Strandell (Eds) *Perhe, työ ja tunteet. Ristiriitoja ja ratkaisuja* (Porvoo: WSOY).
- [23] Anne Ollila (1990) Perhe—ura vai vankila, in Kari Immonen (Ed.) *Naisen elämä. Mistä on pienet tytöt tehty, mistä tyttöjen äidit* (Keuruu: Otava).
- [24] Aromaa, 'Tyttöikä'; Jousimaa 'Jokainen lapsi'; Nätkin, 'Famij, klass och kön'.
- [25] Women gained equal rights with men to inherit farmland in the 1860s (Moring, 'Widowhood Options and Strategies'), while married women obtained control over their own earnings in 1889. Women gained the vote in 1906. The Law on Marriage in 1929 stipulated that husband and wife be financially independent but with rights to each other's income. This same law decreed that husbands ceased to be their wives' legal guardians and granted divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. Bradley, 'The Antecedents of Finnish Family Laws'.
- [26] Ibid.
- [27] Nätkin, 'Famij, klass och kön'.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Julkunen, 'Suomalainen sukupuolimalli'; Ollila, 'Perhe—ura vai vankila'; Jaana Vuori (2001) *Äidit, isät ja ammattilaiset* (Tampere: Tampere University Press).
- [30] May, 'Lone Motherhood Past and Present'.
- [31] Eva Gottberg (1996) *Perhesuhteet ja lainsäädäntö* (Turku: Turun yliopisto).
- [32] Riitta Jallinoja (1984) Perhekäsityksistä perhettä koskeviin ratkaisuihin, in Elina Haavio-Mannila, Riitta Jallinoja & Harriet Strandell (Eds) *Perhe, työ ja tunteet. Ristiriitoja ja ratkaisuja* (Porvoo: WSOY); Central Statistical Office of Finland 1997; Kirsti Kurki-Suonio (1999) *Äidinhoivasta yhteishuoltoon—lapsen edun muuttuvat oikeudelliset tulkinnot. Oikeusvertaileva tutkimus* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen lakimiesyhdistyksen julkaisuja, Sarja A nro 222); Riitta Auvinen (1995) *Lapsiperhe Suomessa* (D28/1995) (Helsinki: Family Federation of Finland, Population Research Institute).
- [33] Jousimaa, *Jokainen lapsi*; Veera Reuna (1997) *Perhebarometri 1997* (E3/1997) (Helsinki: Family Federation of Finland, Population Research Institute).
- [34] Riitta Hjerpe (1990) *Kasvun vuosisata* (Helsinki: VAPK-kustannus); Julkunen, 'Suomalainen sukupuolimalli'.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Ritva Nätkin (2003) Moninaiset perhemuodot ja lapsen hyvä, in Hannele Forsberg & Ritva Nätkin (Eds) *Perhe murroksessa: Kriittisen perhetutkimuksen jäljillä* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus).
- [37] Anne-Maria Holli (2003) *Discourse and Politics for Gender Equality in Late Twentieth Century Finland* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki); Kirsti Lempiäinen (2002) Kansallisuuden tekeminen ja toisto, in Tuula Gordon, Katri Komulainen & Kirsti Lempiäinen (Eds) *Suomineitonen, hei! Kansallisuuden sukupuoli* (Tampere: Vastapaino).
- [38] Central Statistical Office of Finland (1998a) *Naiset ja miehet Suomessa 1998* (Sukupuolten tasa-arvo 3) (Helsinki: Author).
- [39] Central Statistical Office of Finland (1998b) *Tasa-arvobarometri 1998* (Elinolot 1998:1) (Helsinki: Central Statistical Office of Finland); Veera Reuna (1998) *Perhebarometri 1998: Vastuu perheen arjessa* (E4/1998) (Helsinki: Family Federation of Finland, Population Research Institute).
- [40] Barbara Hobson (1994) Solo Mothers, Social Policy Regimes and the Logics of Gender, in Diane Sainsbury (Ed.) *Gendering Welfare States* (London: Sage).
- [41] Katja Forsén (1998) *Children, Families and the Welfare State: studies on the outcomes of the Finnish family policy* (Research Report 92) (Helsinki: National Research and

- Development Centre for Welfare and Health); Björn Halleröd, Daniel Larsson, David Gordon & Veli-Matti Ritakallio (2006) Relative Deprivation: a comparative analysis of Britain, Finland and Sweden, *Journal of European Social Policy*, 16, pp. 328–345.
- [42] Ollila, 'Perhe—ura vai vankila'; Vuori, *Äidit, isät ja ammattilaiset*.
- [43] Kurki-Suonio, *Äidinhoivasta yhteishuoltoon*.
- [44] Nätkin, 'Moninaiset perhemuodot'.
- [45] Jouko Huttunen (2001) *Isänä olemisen uudet suunnat: Hoiva-isiä, etä-isiä ja ero-isiä* (Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus); Minna Rantalaiho (2003) Pohjoismaisen isyyspolitiikan isäkuva, in Forsberg & Nätkin (Eds), *Perhe murroksessa*; Jaana Vuori (2003) Äitiyden ainekset, in Forsberg & Nätkin (Eds), *Perhe murroksessa*.
- [46] Ibid.; Hannele Forsberg (1995) Sosiaalitoimiston isä: Kaivattu, toivoton ja uhkaava, in Leena Eräsaari, Raija Julkunen & Harriet Silius (Eds) *Naiset yksityisen ja julkisen rajalla* (Tampere: Vastapaino).
- [47] Marjo Kuronen (2003) Eronnut perhe?, in Forsberg & Nätkin (Eds), *Perhe murroksessa*.
- [48] Raija Julkunen (2006) *Perheen vastaisku: Familistista käännettä jäljittämässä* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus).
- [49] Vanessa May (2008) On Being a 'Good' Mother: the moral presentation of self in written life stories, *Sociology*, 42, pp. 470–486.
- [50] Carol Smart & Bren Neale (1999) *Family Fragments?* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- [51] Ibid.; Janet Ribbens McCarthy, Ros Edwards & Val Gillies (2003) *Making Families: moral tales of parenting and step-parenting* (Durham: Sociology Press).
- [52] May, 'Lone Motherhood Past and Present'.