



MANNHEIMER ZENTRUM FÜR  
EUROPÄISCHE SOZIALFORSCHUNG

**Making Ends Meet.  
Lone Mothers' Local Subsistence Strategies.  
Case Studies from Italy and Sweden**

Arbeitspapiere

Working papers

Claudia Gardberg Morner

Arbeitspapiere -  
Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung  
ISSN 1437-8574

Nr. 13, 2000

Claudia Gardberg Morner

**Making Ends Meet.**

**Lone Mothers' Local Subsistence Strategies.**

**Case Studies from Italy and Sweden**

Working Papers from the *International Project on Family Change and Family Policies*, Research Department A, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research.

The International Project on Family Change and Family Policies, co-directed by Prof. Flora (University of Mannheim, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research) and Profs. Kamerman and Kahn (Columbia University School of Social Work, New York), analyses changes in family structures and family policies in long-term and comparative perspectives in 20 countries in Europe and overseas. Primary output will be publication of a 7-volume-series on family changes and family policies, including five volumes with country studies and two comparative volumes. Another major objective is building up a family policy database which will include regularly updated time series. The project is supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). Related to this project, the European Commission finances a training and mobility program of young researchers, which concentrates on recent developments of families in European welfare states in comparative perspective.

**Gardberg Morner, Claudia:**

Making Ends Meet : Lone Mothers' Local Subsistence Strategies. Case Studies from Italy and Sweden / Claudia Gardberg Morner. –

Mannheim, 2000

(Arbeitspapiere - Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung ; 13)

ISSN 1437-8574

Not available in book shops.

Token fee: DM 5,-

Purchase: Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung (MZES), D – 68131 Mannheim

WWW: <http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de>

Editorial Note:

*Claudia Gardberg Morner obtained her Bachelors degree in Political Science in 1993 and her Masters degree in Sociology in 1996 from the University of Göteborg, Sweden. Since autumn 1996 she has been a doctoral student and research assistant at the Department of Sociology at the same university. She is presently working within the project "Subsistence and Welfare in Transition", which investigates the situation of lone mother families in the wake of the labour market and welfare system changes that have taken place in Sweden during the 1990s. Her PhD work is based on this project. Within the TMR programme Claudia Gardberg Morner spent six months in Torino, Italy, where she carried out research on lone mothers' subsistence strategies. Her research interests include welfare system and labour market changes from a gender perspective, but also processes of marginalisation/exclusion, urban poverty, subsistence strategies, atypical labour and informal economy.*

## Abstract

This report is concerned with lone-mother families in Sweden and Italy. The study focuses on subsistence strategies, that is, how mothers combine different sources of income and support in order to make ends meet financially. Subsistence strategies are worked out in the intersection between labour market, welfare systems and personal or informal networks, and the mothers' relations with these different spheres are investigated. The research focus is local and urban, based on qualitative interviews with lone mothers in two peripheral areas in the cities of Göteborg and Torino.

The research, as well as the outline of the report, is based on a methodological approach that tries to capture the different levels between the structure and the individual. A point of departure is the structural level of national policy and of overarching changes in the welfare system and labour market in the two project countries during the 1990s. The situation of lone mothers in the two different national contexts is discussed.

An important aspect of the project lies in its local focus, the significance of the local context in lone mothers' choice of subsistence strategies. The local project areas in Torino and Göteborg are therefore described in relative detail in order to capture and present the "different levels of locality" that I discern between the city/municipality level and the individual level.

The study hence brings together a variety of information at the national and local levels and includes different aspects that have an impact on the living conditions of lone mothers, such as social policies, (local) labour markets, family relationships, local infrastructure and neighbourhood. The main focus, however, is on the individual level and the mothers' own interpretation of their situation.

The interviews revealed that the lone mothers participating in the present research tended to evaluate their relationships with the labour market, welfare system and personal networks in terms of *dependency* and *autonomy*. These concepts were then applied at the level of individual experience. The same pair of concepts is often used at the level of policy formation, where for instance individual autonomy is considered an important prerequisite of social citizenship. These concepts are further elaborated in the concluding sections of the report, where I discuss the composition of lone mothers' income packages in the Italian and Swedish samples, the possible significance of that composition for the families, and the mothers' interpretation of their relationships with different actors in the surrounding society.

## Acknowledgements

My warmest gratitude goes to the lone mothers in this report for sharing their experiences and teaching me much, but most of all for the friendliness and warmth with which they all received and opened up to a complete stranger.

Professor Ulla Björnberg at the Department of Sociology in Göteborg is responsible for the Swedish project 'Subsistence and Welfare in Transition'. She also serves as Swedish partner and representative for the TMR Programme. Prof. Björnberg has provided substantial help with practical issues related to my TMR stay abroad, but most of all I am grateful for her continuous support and guidance regarding my scientific work.

The National Insurance Office in Göteborg, through Jhonny Söderlund, were very helpful regarding selection of interviewees for the Swedish project. The Mannheim Centre for Social Research coordinates the TMR Programme. A special mention must go to Astrid Pfenning, whose never-ending helpfulness and flexibility have greatly helped with the practical aspects of moving to another country with a family. Two of my TMR colleagues, Riitta Kyllönen and Ingrid Mairhuber, have also been helpful in this respect.

In Italy I was a guest researcher at the Department of Social Sciences in Torino under Professor Chiara Saraceno, Italian TMR partner. I met with an open and friendly research environment, and many people were involved in helping me in different ways with the initial stages of my field work: Odillo Vidoni, Igor Piotto, Rocco Sciarrone, Filippo Barbera, Nicola Negri, Nicoletta Bosco and Manuela Olagnero. Field work in Torino turned out to be an arduous experience in many respects, and would not have been possible had it not been for the friendliness and helpfulness of the "local welfare state representatives" that I came in contact with in my project area, Circonscrizione 5. A special mention goes to *economas* Rosangela Bonetto and Maria Virginia Cristiano, to social workers Agata Curà and Rosy de Micco and to Doretta Raiteri at the *Vallette cantieri di lavoro*.

To be a mother and at the same time participate in an international research programme would not have been possible had it not been for the willingness of Marco and Anton, my husband and my son, to follow me on a six-month research stay abroad. As always, Marco has also offered essential practical help and constructive suggestions regarding my research. With love and appreciation I thank you both.

Funding for the Swedish project is provided by The Swedish Council of Social Research (project F0123/1998). Funding for the Italian project was provided by the European Commission's Training and Mobility Programme for Young Researchers 'Family and Welfare State in Europe' (ERB FMRX CT960027).

# Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. A note on methodology and concepts	2
3. The Northern and the Southern welfare state: similarities and differences	5
3.1 Lone mothers in Sweden and Italy	9
4. A growing focus on local studies in welfare research	10
4.1 The different levels of locality	11
5. Göteborg and Torino	13
5.2 Segregation as a multidimensional phenomenon	14
5.3 Local welfare arrangements	15
5.4 Choice of areas	15
6. The Göteborg study – Lärjedalen	16
6.1 Hammarkullen, Hjällbo and Eriksbo - the greater neighbourhood.	17
6.2 The small neighbourhood	19
7. The Torino study – Circonscrizione 5	20
7.1 Vallette, Lucento, Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria – the greater neighbourhood	21
7.2 The small neighbourhood	22
8. Lone mothers in a local Swedish context	23
9. Lone mothers in a local Italian context	31
10. Making ends meet in a European local context	38

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this report is to study *lone mothers' strategies of subsistence* in the context of local welfare states. Subsistence strategies are seen as the way incomes from formal and informal labour, exchange of money, goods and services within personal networks, and financial transfers as well as social services provided by the local welfare state are combined. The overarching questions guiding the research are:

- How do lone mothers combine these sources in order to make ends meet in the context of a changing labour market and welfare state?
- What kind of framework is set by national family policies?

The empirical work underlying the report focuses on the *local urban level*. One reason for this is the fact that welfare systems in Europe have gone through a process of decentralisation, giving way to a larger degree of local variation within countries. Another reason is my interest in the processes of segregation that have become ever more evident in many larger European cities over the last decades – the fact that economic and social processes can be said to have a clear spatial expression. In the project, the local neighbourhood is believed to influence the lone mothers' choices in various ways. I therefore do not concentrate on the city level, but study *areas at the periphery of larger cities*. The cases chosen, districts within the cities of Torino (Italy) and Göteborg (Sweden), are located within different national European welfare contexts. The two different national and local welfare systems are presented and compared in the report, with distinct focus on the local level.

Strategies and means of subsistence chosen are also in the end very dependent upon the individual situation of, and choices made by, the lone mothers themselves. Interviews were conducted with lone mothers in the Lärjedalen area in Göteborg and in the Circonscrizione 5 area in Torino. *The study focuses on these interviews*, i.e. on the women's own understanding and interpretation of their situation, as well as their explanation of strategies implemented and choices of action taken.

The relationship between state/welfare systems, (labour) market and family is dynamic, changing in time and depending on context. The interaction between the three, often structural and abstract, gets its concrete expression at the local level. The labour market and the welfare systems, as well as forms of family formation and dissolution, have undergone extensive changes in Europe over the last decades and increasingly so in recent years. One important reason for this has been the economic and industrial crisis and increased unemployment. These processes have led to a greater risk of marginalisation and poverty, and in many countries the gaps between different groups in society have noticeably widened.<sup>2</sup> The relationships and processes described are *gendered*. Women and men do not have the same position and possibilities in the formal labour market, and partly as a consequence their relation to the welfare state, i.e. their social rights, differs. Women generally find themselves in a more precarious labour market position, with a higher degree of part-time, temporary and atypical labour compared to men. As a consequence,

their transfer payments from the welfare system in the form of sickness insurance or pensions, for example, are lower. Social insurance coverage is thus in practice very different for women and men even if, as in Sweden, it is gender neutral in construction.<sup>3</sup> Also within households and family and kin networks, power relationships and the division of labour are based on gender roles. As a result, the effects of changes in the relationship between state, market and family are gendered.

Lone mothers as a group are normally affected early and distinctively by these kinds of changes and they have also often been seen as a kind of “litmus group” to measure the effects of social changes.<sup>4</sup> It is of course not lone motherhood in itself that leads to economic constraints or poverty risks, but lone motherhood in combination with the kind of conditions and processes described above. It can be argued that all lone mothers, albeit to a greater or lesser extent, face the same “problems”, namely money and time. For the sole provider of the family income, who is also solely responsible for raising the children, the equation of money and time is arguably more difficult than for a two-parent family. How a lone mother chooses to solve this equation is a personal choice, but it greatly depends upon the labour market and welfare structure, as well as upon the cultural context. Is it possible to work full-time and still provide care for the children? Is it economically possible to work part-time? Do lone mothers find work at all? How are lone mothers generally regarded in society - as a stigmatised group or as an accepted family form? If the original “problem” is to some extent universal, the *strategies implemented to solve it* can differ greatly depending on context. That is what this report is about.

## 2. A note on methodology and concepts<sup>5</sup>

This study focuses on the individual in a local context. Macro-level factors must however also be taken into consideration. Between the individual and society at a national level there are other levels that have to be considered for a fuller understanding of the individuals’ possibilities and choices. The research design has been inspired by Layder’s “research map” (Layder 1993):

H I S T O R Y	4. CONTEXT	Class and gender relations on a macro level Welfare state system, family policies, labour market regulations
	3. SETTING	Local welfare state and labour market. Social services, child care, health care, living environment, etc.
	2. SITUATED ACTIVITY	The women’s direct contact with representatives for the setting level, as well as with family, kin and other networks
	1. SELF	The women’s own understanding of their situation and possibilities. How do they view their roles as providers, workers and mothers?

In-depth interviews with lone mothers and interviews with local actors are sources of information on the first two levels. Local statistics and other relevant information are complemented by a description of the local context. An awareness of the underlying macro level is necessary because people act within a social



and historical context. Previous research as well as statistics are helpful to this aim.<sup>6</sup> From a class and gender perspective it is interesting to see how the distribution of resources in society at a general level influences activities and possibilities at the local/individual level. The levels in Layder's model shown above do not correspond exactly to the levels I have distinguished in this research (the main difference being that I have found it helpful to distinguish more levels; see section 4.1), but have rather been used as a helpful tool. The study focuses on the levels that Layder calls "self" and "situated activity". The work has also been methodologically inspired by grounded theory, an approach that constantly layers empirical work with theoretical work and analysis.<sup>7</sup>

The main method applied in the project has been qualitative, personal interviews with lone mothers. In all, one hundred women were interviewed: 75 mothers in Sweden and 25 mothers in Italy.<sup>8</sup> Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Almost all interviews were conducted in person, except for some of the Swedish interviews which were conducted by phone.<sup>9</sup> The interviews were semi-structured, following a questionnaire containing both shorter questions with alternative replies and themes for less-structured discussion. The personal meeting with the interviewee, normally in her home, provided good contact with the mother and a fuller understanding of the situation, beyond the questionnaire. Also shorter questions were often discussed more openly and at length.

### Who is a lone mother?

It is not self-evident who should be considered a lone mother. A point of departure in the present project has been that a lone mother is a woman living alone with her children. How the interviewee became a lone mother – through divorce, separation, death of mate or if she never lived with the father of the child – was not deemed relevant for the project. The path to lone motherhood is taken into consideration when/if this influences the family's subsistence strategies, but does not alter the definition of the category.<sup>10</sup> The age of the child(ren) in the family is another aspect that tends to vary between countries depending on statistical usage. In this project, families have been included where the "children" are as old as 30 years. This is because as long as a person lives with his or her mother (or father) and is not autonomous, the parent can be considered to be in a parenting situation (confirmed in the interviews by a continuous financial and "service" responsibility of all the mothers in the sample with children of legal age and above). The general European trend of children staying longer in the parental home, especially the Italian tendency to stay in the parental home well up until the late twenties (and longer),<sup>11</sup> underlines the importance of not excluding e.g. parents living with children over 18 from the category of lone-parent families.

More controversial might be the fact that some of the women in the project turned out to be not the only adult in the household (ten cases in Sweden and three cases in Italy). In nine of these cases the other adult was a relative: a mother, sister or aunt. These cases are found among the immigrant mothers in the Swedish study and a couple of the Italian mothers. In four of the cases however, the other adult was a new partner. These women specifically emphasized that they considered themselves to be lone *mothers*, even if they were no longer emotionally alone but involved in a new relationship. I have decided to include

these cases for the present, since I feel they point to interesting aspects of defining new family formations and obligations. This is hence an alteration from the original point of departure, but one that I found it important to learn more about from the mothers themselves rather than excluding them from the study a priori.

It should also be noted that I see lone mothers not as a specific, static social group, but as persons in a specific life-cycle phase, assuming lone parenthood to be a situation that any person can potentially find themselves in for a longer or shorter period of time during the life cycle.<sup>12</sup>

### What is meant by “subsistence strategies”?

The concept of strategy presupposes an active subject, i.e. someone capable of making choices and actions. This does not exclude the fact that structural factors influence and in some sense limit the mothers' situations and possibilities of action, and that strategies are formed within given frameworks that cannot always be influenced. Studies have shown that single mothers make up a heterogeneous group and that mothers use different strategies in order to create a life form that works well for both themselves and their children.<sup>13</sup> In this research, the concept “coping strategies”, briefly defined as “actors' problem-solving behaviour”, has been used to describe how lone mothers handle their lives as single parents.<sup>14</sup> Coping strategies include economic problem-solving, but also handling the new family situation on other levels that are not directly connected to material conditions, for example emotionally.

The focus in the project and in this report is on subsistence strategies, or how different sources of subsistence/income are combined. The aim is also to understand to what extent long-term planning (for example education or a new job) is included in the choice of action alternatives, and to what degree a conscious weighing of advantages and drawbacks precedes these choices. The concept includes the question of how to make existing resources suffice, i.e. economising and consumption.<sup>15</sup> The choice of financial solutions must, however, be put into a broader perspective. It is important also to take into consideration how the mothers perceive their situation as lone parent, and their relations to family, friends and society.

Subsistence strategies include four main elements:

- a) wage labour in the formal labour market;
- b) transfers in the form of benefits;
- c) exchange within the family and with relatives and friends in the form of goods and services, but also in the form of economic transfers;
- d) informal incomes.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. The Northern and the Southern welfare state: similarities and differences

Italy and Sweden are often viewed as typical examples of two different types of welfare regime.<sup>17</sup> Sweden often serves as the best example of the so-called social democratic welfare state, whose main features are the universalist character of social rights and the fact that these are expressed through a direct relationship between the system and the individual.<sup>18</sup> Labour unions, temperance movements and later the feminist movement played an important role in building the Swedish welfare state.<sup>19</sup> The main features of the Italian welfare system, on the other hand, are its corporatist legacy, the fact that the system is based more on the family/group than on the individual, and the strong influence of the Catholic Church as well as leftist political forces during the post-war era of welfare-state construction.<sup>20</sup>

#### Family policy

Italy has been said to have a non-existent, or at least very implicit, family policy. The country applies a system of individual taxation, while social rights are based on the family/group. Local and national welfare systems of different kinds often have their origins in social rights for workers, which were later extended to include other segments of the population, as can be seen in the development of a national health system.<sup>21</sup> The individual can therefore exercise his or her social rights primarily in the capacity of group member (breadwinner, wife of worker, mother etc.) and not as an individual in need. This makes belonging to the “right” group – or having the right kind of employment that entitles one to various rights – important. There is no general economic help for families with children, such as child allowance,<sup>22</sup> and there is also no general insurance or safety net against poverty at a national level.<sup>23</sup> The basic organisation of labour market and welfare systems (both services and transfers, such as pensions) is hence based on the nuclear family (married couple with children). The institutionalisation of various policies implicitly directed at the family has over time resulted in a complex and often contradictory network of regional and local systems. Social services are generally provided by many actors and in different organisational forms; laws and regulations are often regional or local, leading to great variation within the country. Since universal coverage is low, lone mothers, along with other economically-vulnerable groups, normally have to rely on targeted, means-tested measures, with great local variations.

Economic assistance and social insurance are thus largely dependent upon civil status, connection to the labour market, but also upon where a person lives.<sup>24</sup> Social assistance levels are normally so low that they have to be complemented by other, informal, incomes. Rent is often included in the total sum a person/family receives. In general, the system tends to be based on a moral estimation of whether the applicant is “deserving” or “undeserving”, i.e. the cause of economic deprivation is taken into consideration. This is especially true for the “able-bodied poor”, whereas elderly, handicapped or ill are relatively well covered by a comprehensive pension system. Housing assistance exists in the form of subsidised housing (see below). It is important to the mothers in the study that lone parents have in practice no unconditional

right to maintenance allowance. Maintenance for children after divorce or separation depends on agreement between parents or the discontented parties' possibilities to take the issue to court.

Welfare services are generally quite well developed, especially health care, schools and child care. Regarding child care, however, there is a great difference between care for children over and under the age of three. Care for children under age three (*assilo nido*) is relatively scarce and expensive, whereas care for children over age three (*scuola materna*) is well developed and more affordable. Limited opening hours create problems for working mothers.<sup>25</sup> Care work is primarily expected to be performed within the family (by women), which presupposes a male breadwinner. Intra-generational help is a cultural norm, and when mothers work it is normally the parents (or other extended family members) who step in and take care of the children. The form of economic support and social services in Italy can thus make it difficult, time- or money-wise, for individuals and families who do not conform to the so-called male breadwinner model.<sup>26</sup>

In Sweden the family has been the explicit focus of discussion during the development of social policy systems ever since the 1930s, and more specifically after the Second World War. As in Italy, welfare rights were largely based on the rights of workers and the system was constructed in a way that presupposes full, or almost full, employment (hence based on a certain balance between tax revenues and benefit expenses). This is an important reason behind retrenchments in the welfare systems during later years of economic crisis and increased unemployment. A basic idea underlying the Swedish welfare system has however been that the state should be responsible for social insurance and that entitlement both to social services and social security should be *individual and universalistic* in character. Labour market and unemployment policies have always been very central and considered within the wider framework of economic policy. The principle of compensation for loss of income as well as an explicit striving towards redistribution have been important here.<sup>27</sup>

In Sweden, there is universal insurance against poverty at a national level through a *social assistance* system that guarantees a basic minimum income and paid housing (the minimum amount is paid besides the rent). General universal help to families with children is given through *child support* and lone parents' unconditional right to *maintenance allowance*. Families with children also often make use of *housing subsidies*, which aim at guaranteeing families' ability to afford a decent standard of housing. Free and equal health care and education for all have been central in the construction of the system. Subsidised and well-developed child care (regarding coverage as well as opening hours) have been imperative for mothers', especially lone mothers', possibilities to participate in paid labour. A generous parental leave system has made it easier for those involved in the labour market to raise a family (the parental insurance is based on former income, but there is also a minimum guarantee level for those who are not employed prior to pregnancy).<sup>28</sup> Both economic benefits and social services in Sweden can thus be said to be "family friendly", with the aim of enabling both parents to combine work and family life – the so-called dual breadwinner model. It must be emphasized, however, that in spite of the universalistic and generous aims of overarching Swedish family policy, there can be relatively great variations in implementation. One dividing line is

between citizens with a strong connection to the labour market and those without. The minimum guarantee level of transfers is normally much lower than the compensation for loss of income, sometimes so low that it has to be complemented by means-tested benefits. In Sweden, there are also large local variations in service and benefit levels. For instance, the level of social assistance varies between municipalities (even if there is a minimum level established by law which municipalities cannot go below), as do child-care fees. Therefore also in Sweden, place of residence is a relevant factor for subsistence.

In both Sweden and Italy, lastly, it might be of importance to mention an increasing focus on active labour market policies through so called “workfare”. This policy underlines that able bodied persons should primarily work for a living. For unemployed this means that they have to “prove” that they actively seek work, for instance by reporting regularly to the unemployment office. In some cases (and here exist many local variations) unemployed are required to perform some kind of work in exchange for benefits. Workfare policies include activities such as various kinds of social work (hospitals, schools etc.) and education, which are aimed at giving the unemployed better possibilities in the labour market through increased experience and knowledge. In both countries, a critical discussion has also taken place about how persons in these kind of activities risk being used by employers, in the sense that they often perform more or less the same work as others in the workplace, but are paid less and without secure employment conditions.<sup>29</sup> Active labour market policies, through workfare or education, are much more wide spread (covers a larger proportion of the population) in Sweden than in Italy.

### **A home of one’s own. Housing policies in Sweden and Italy**

Housing policies are of great interest to the mothers in the project. The cost of living and living conditions strongly influence a family’s economic situation and quality of life.<sup>30</sup>The urban peripheral project areas in the project have distinctive features that are direct consequences of housing policies applied by the two countries during different periods of time.

In the 1950s, Sweden still had a comparatively low housing standard. Population growth and migration to the cities led to fast and extensive changes and a lack of adequate housing. In light of these developments, the government implemented the “Million Programme” housing project: one million dwellings were to be built during a ten-year period between 1965 and 1974. At the same time, it was considered important that the housing projects did not rob too much labour from industry. New and large-scale housing construction methods were the solution to the problem. As a result, many of the Million Programme housing areas are very large-scale, often with quite scant architecture. At the same time, the apartments in the new areas had high standards which was an improvement for many of those who moved there. Kitchen appliances such as stoves and refrigerators, etc., are obligatory in all Swedish rental apartments today. If something in the apartment breaks down, it is the responsibility of the housing company to repair it. Common laundry rooms are also typical. For this reason, it was (and is) not necessary for Swedes who want to set up their own household to buy major household appliances, which makes starting out cheaper than in many other countries.

However, the urgent need for new housing decreased before the programme was completed, and some projects were not finished completely while others were delayed. An aspect that was often forgotten or not completed was services in the new neighbourhoods. Scant architecture, inadequate infrastructure and social problems soon became hallmarks of the new areas. Over the years, improvement programmes of different kinds have been implemented in many Million Programme areas, usually to improve the physical environment. The image of areas marked by a comparatively high degree of social problems has however remained over the years.<sup>31</sup>

In the early 1990s, Sweden was in a difficult economic situation, resulting in rising unemployment and welfare retrenchments. A discussion about widening gaps between different groups in society began, and one important focus was a preoccupation with the increasing geographical segregation evident in the larger cities. As a response, the government implemented development programmes aimed at sustainable social development with the participation of the inhabitants themselves and with the housing companies as very active actors. Some areas were chosen as National Examples, where much money will be invested over the next years, trying out new methods to stop negative developments and improve the areas physically, but most of all socially.<sup>32</sup> One of the areas in the Swedish project, Hjällbo, was chosen as a National Example, a fact that naturally influences the situation of the mothers participating in the project.

In Italy, it is more common to own one's home than in Sweden. Barely 30% of apartments are rented, and only 6% are in the public housing sector (22% in Sweden).<sup>33</sup> Of interest to the project is the great difference here between Sweden and Italy in terms of minimum standards: the standards described for the Swedish apartments do not exist in Italy. The general standard of apartments has however greatly improved in Italy over the years. Ownership is traditionally the most common housing form, and most of those who rent do so from a private landlord. A tradition of the residents being responsible for the own apartment is therefore prevalent. Public housing for the needy, *case popolari*, is often of a simple standard, but also very cheap. It is however difficult today to find this kind of apartment.

As in Sweden, there was a period after the war when it was deemed necessary to increase construction, and Italy too had a ten-year plan (*Piano Decennale*) for housing construction which was in many ways similar to the Million Programme, though implemented much later (1978-1988). In Italy too, one of the greatest deficiencies in the areas constructed from the 1960s onwards is the insufficient service level. Improvement programmes were implemented during the 1980s, when much new construction took place. In many places in Italy too, the problems connected with certain kinds of housing areas have become ever more evident.<sup>34</sup> In Torino a development programme much like the Swedish ones is underway; though less comprehensive, it still stresses the participation of the residents themselves and the importance of social development. It will however not affect the mothers in the project in the near future, even if one of the housing improvement areas – Corso Grosseto- is in the project area. Relevant for the Italian mothers is the general tradition of ownership, as well as the existence of *case popolari* especially intended for people with very low incomes.

### 3.1 Lone mothers in Sweden and Italy

In research regarding lone mothers' social and economic exposure in Europe, specific attention has been given to the role of the welfare state in mothers' employment outside the home.<sup>35</sup> The discussion has focused on whether welfare policies treat lone mothers primarily as mothers or as workers. Does the formulation of welfare systems encourage or hinder lone mothers from participating in gainful employment?<sup>36</sup>

In international comparison, lone mothers in Sweden are regarded as workers. Social support systems are directed at supporting the paid employment of mothers, both lone and married.<sup>37</sup> Lone parents have been included within the policy framework for working parents without being singled out as a specific group, and policy is supposed to be neutral in relation to family forms. Adults with children are regarded in their capacity as mothers and fathers, rather than husbands and wives. The family form the parents choose should not affect their rights and duties with regard to their children, and it is actually the children's rights which have been the focus of Swedish policy-making. Subsidised public day-care, child allowance, housing allowance, parental and sick leave benefits are directed at all parents. Maintenance allowance is received by mothers, but the allowance itself is based on the father's responsibilities towards his children rather than on the mother belonging to a group with specific needs. As Hobson and Takahachi (1997) have pointed out, while this approach has meant that lone mothers have not been singled out or stigmatised as a deviant group, it has also hidden or obscured the economic and social pressures placed on lone parents as breadwinners and carers in families.<sup>38</sup>

Scholars have pointed out that lone mothers have been an invisible group in Italian policy-making and research. The group of lone mothers is comparatively small in Italy, and also in practice they easily become invisible due to the fact that they often move back to the family of origin with their children after separation, divorce or death of mate.<sup>39</sup> The family steps in to help with the time/money equation in different ways, and so the specific problems a lone-parent family might face do not become very visible to the social system. Widows used to constitute the largest proportion of lone mothers, and death of mate is still a very common path to lone motherhood in Italy. However, since the mid-1980s this pattern has changed, and separated and divorced women now form the largest group.<sup>40</sup> Widows are often covered by some kind of survivors' pension (even if it is normally low and has to be complemented with other incomes), which might have increased the "invisibility" of divorced and separated women. Traditionally, divorced and separated women have also been quite heavily stigmatised, while widowhood has been seen as a respectable condition. When lone mothers receive help from the welfare system it is normally in the form of needs-tested benefits such as social assistance or help with public housing or child care. Recipients generally view needs-tested assistance as more stigmatising than benefits based on social rights. In both countries, lone mothers are in a sense invisible within the social system. If they experience economic difficulties they are often included in the more general category of needy poor, but even when they fare well their specific needs (especially in Sweden) are "hidden" behind the more overarching categories of parent, worker or citizen or (in Italy) within the extended family.

Regarding labour market participation, it is interesting to see that in spite of their different situation in the welfare system, both Italian and Swedish lone mothers most commonly work, and when they do they tend to work full-time. In both countries, income from wage labour constitutes the largest proportion of lone mothers' income packages.<sup>41</sup> In Sweden, labour market participation and wage income are complemented by extensive social rights that facilitate the combination of work and family life. For instance it is not uncommon for women to take advantage of the possibility to work part-time when the children are small. It has been pointed out, however, that this possibility sometimes risks becoming a trap as women are offered less work than they would prefer due to the extensive use of part-time in the labour market, and Swedish women indeed report a certain degree of underemployment.<sup>42</sup> Most lone mothers in Sweden however work full-time.

In Italy lone mothers tend to be regarded as workers who happen to be mothers, rather than mothers who also work.<sup>43</sup> Part-time work is scarce, and at the same time the welfare system does not nearly meet the needs connected with being both a lone parent and a full-time worker. This is where the extended family steps in, and the labour market and the family of origin constitute the most important support for lone mothers in Italy. It is interesting to see, therefore, that in countries whose social policies differ as much as Sweden's and Italy's, lone mothers find the best solution to their subsistence problems to be full-time labour. There is thus no proof for the hypothesis that a well-developed assistance system makes people refrain from working. In comparison, lone mothers in Sweden find themselves in a more secure position due to the social safety net that secures them an income even if they lose their job. It might also be easier to combine work and family life in a context where day-care, the parental leave system, the possibility to stay home with sick children, etc. are regarded as social rights also in practice. Having said that, lone mothers as a group have been severely affected by increased unemployment and welfare retrenchment in the 1990s. In Sweden, lone mothers' labour market participation has decreased compared to married mothers, and changes in the welfare system such as diminished compensation amounts also arguably affect such a group more.<sup>44</sup>

#### **4. A growing focus on local studies in welfare research**

Throughout Europe, the organisation of welfare systems and the labour market have undergone processes of decentralisation. Responsibilities and decision-making take their concrete form on the regional or municipal/city level, even when the framework is set by national laws and regulations. This is not in itself a new phenomenon, but in many countries this tendency has been increasing over the last decade or so as responsibilities and competences at the local level have grown at the expense of central state administration.<sup>45</sup> In this division of tasks we are basically dealing with three different levels: the national, regional, and city or municipal levels. (In Italy, the province is also an important policy actor which has increased in importance in recent years.) As a consequence, both monetary benefits (mainly social assistance) and social services, such as health, school and day-care, can vary greatly depending on where a person lives.



Variation is found not only between regions or municipalities within the same country, but also within municipalities. This trend has made Swedish researchers question whether we are witnessing a trend towards reduced universalism – has decentralisation signified a greater degree of selectivity in the administration of welfare assistance?<sup>46</sup>

Lone mothers' possibilities and choices at the local level are steered by actual conditions, such as quality of services offered and the local labour market. The concept of subsistence strategies focuses mainly on financial and material conditions. At the same time, people tend to base their actions on values and norms. It is important to look at the interaction with the surrounding society and the more emotional aspects of living as a lone mother. Much of the strategy research mentioned above has had this aim, i.e. how the situation as lone mother is handled emotionally and relationally, how those close to the mother treat her and how the woman herself values and views lone parenthood.<sup>47</sup>

How social life works in the local neighbourhood is therefore arguably of importance to mothers.<sup>48</sup> Social networks in the neighbourhood can be of great help, as it can be difficult if one is excluded for some reason. Maintaining networks takes time and energy, and norms can be very strong, which can be yet another aspect involved in the choice of subsistence strategies, for example regarding the choice to enter the labour market. Duncan and Edwards (1997) have studied the significance of the local community for lone mothers' decisions to participate in paid labour:

“The local setting is a particularly important and relevant part of single mothers' lives – a socially structured factor in the background of opportunities and constraints that are built into single mothers' daily routines. Single mothers' neighbourhood support networks represent local structures of interaction, giving them access to resources, or being resources in themselves, both through organised groups and other personal ties. Localised networks of kin and friends can be significant materially, including providing single mothers with child-care support in contexts where there is little publicly funded provision available.”<sup>49</sup>

#### **4.1 The different levels of locality**

The discussion above underlines the importance of local studies. From the city or municipal level there is still some distance to the everyday life context of the individual. I therefore find it important to distinguish different levels within the local context as follows:

- district city council or department;
- housing area (the greater neighbourhood);
- the small neighbourhood;
- the individual/family level.

The department level is highly relevant for the local welfare and labour market organisation: it is the level at which the framework of action for the individual citizen is largely set. Health care, school, social services

and other welfare services often get their concrete organisational form at this level, even if the framework is set at the regional or national level. The department is the economic and administrative unit closest to the citizen.

The housing estate or quarter constitutes the “greater neighbourhood”. Services such as shops, post office, bank, housing administration and communications are to be found at this level. Welfare services (health, school, child care) get their concrete expression here. Since the presence or absence of different kinds of services strongly influences people’s daily lives, the service level in a neighbourhood is of great relevance to the inhabitants. Even for persons who do not use local shops on a daily basis, the fact that they exist influences the quality of life. Whether housing is large- or small-scale, whether people rent or own their homes, whether the area is perceived as secure or dangerous, and the population composition are other important aspects. The greater neighbourhood level does not, however, sufficiently capture the individuals’ immediate surroundings, since housing estates are often quite large and internally differentiated. When studying personal networks it can therefore be helpful to distinguish yet another intermediary level between the greater neighbourhood and the individual.

The small neighbourhood constitutes the immediate environment in people’s everyday life. The concept tries to capture both physical aspects and social relations and networks. It aims at understanding the immediate environment of the own home, for example yards and stairwells.<sup>50</sup> The organisation of maintenance and administration, the population composition, the existence or lack of networks and “neighbourhood personalities”,<sup>51</sup> the physical structure of buildings, apartments and common outdoor areas all make up the small neighbourhood. It is on this level that concrete networks are normally formed and values and norms become significant. The small neighbourhood can influence people’s everyday life to a high degree, especially if they spend much time in their homes, and it is reasonable to imagine that this level can be quite relevant to lone mothers. It can be important for lone mothers as the only adult in the household if neighbourhood relations and daily administration and maintenance, i.e. relations with other adults in the area closest to the own home, work well or not.<sup>52</sup>

The individual/family level interacts with the others. The actual shaping of life forms and strategies takes place here. The different paths lone mothers have chosen to handle their situation depend on economic and administrative frameworks and local value patterns. At the same time, however, strategies are ultimately individual choices and decisions that take primarily the own family situation into account, either by the mothers alone or in consultation with the children’s father, the mothers’ own parents or other persons involved in the family situation. The importance of personal networks, for instance the mothers’ family of origin and its perceived responsibilities, varies depending on cultural context and are empirical questions in the project. The impact of migration on possible changes in these patterns is also of interest.

I argue that it is important to discern and describe these different levels rather than speak more generally about neighbourhoods or local community. In research that tries to capture the very complex relationships between the individual and the surrounding society, I believe that distinguishing between different levels of

interaction rather than having a more general contextualisation can provide much clarification. It is true that there are no clear-cut borders between the levels and that any division tends to be a simplification, but I find this division into levels to be helpful for discerning and mapping out a very complex reality. This is also why I find Layder's methodological approach helpful for the present study.

## **5. Göteborg and Torino**<sup>53</sup>

Göteborg lies on the south-west coast of Sweden. With 460,000 inhabitants it is the second largest city in the country. Torino is in north-western Italy, not far from the French border. It is the country's fourth-largest city with approximately 920,000 inhabitants. Despite many differences the two cities are somewhat similar overall: both have a tradition of Fordist industry, represented mainly by Volvo in Göteborg and Fiat in Torino, as well as a history of internal and foreign immigration. Whereas Torino after the First World War started to develop a purely industrial profile, Göteborg profited from its coastal location and built its economy not only on industry but also on trade, which led to the development of a commercial and service sector.

These factors were significant also for the geographic formation and growth of the two cities. Both were characterised by a period of rapid population growth from the late 1950s onwards, which mainly led to a significant growth of the working class. Workers in Göteborg industry came mainly from northern Sweden, Finland and southern Europe, while workers in Torino industry came mainly from southern Italy: the 1950s and 1960s saw a massive internal migration from the southern to the northern parts of the country. In Torino this led to a quite distinct spatial concentration of working-class districts, within the city but also in new suburbs. Even if the situation in Göteborg was somewhat different due to the combination of industry and trade/service occupations, the spatial concentration of different classes became quite evident here as well. Of interest to the project is that in both cities new peripheral areas were built, mainly during the 1960s, specifically to provide housing for the newcomers.

The different developments in the cities have been important during the recent years of industrial decline. While Torino has seen a decreasing population and has been declared by the European Union an area of industrial decline, Göteborg has to some extent managed to replace a declining industrial sector with a growing service sector. Torino was struck by the decline in the Fordist industrial model quite early, and workers in industry decreased by 26% in the decade 1981-91. This led to a rising unemployment polarisation that was reflected in a spatial concentration of the weakest groups. An increase in low-wage, insecure and often informal jobs in services led to increased poverty risks for many. As a consequence, the demographic composition of the city has changed, characterised by a decrease in population (about 14% between 1980-90), a reduction of average household size and an increase of single elderly as well as lone-parent households.

In Göteborg, economic crisis did not fully hit the city until the end of the 1980s, probably because of the importance of the tertiary sector which demanded a more highly educated and skilled labour force. In the early 1990s, unemployment rose (as in the rest of the country) and tendencies of spatial segregation within the city became clearer. During the 1990s, both Torino and Göteborg have experienced a “second wave” of immigration, mainly from countries outside the European Union. For Göteborg, immigration combined with a baby boom in the late 1980s has actually led to a population increase. In spite of this, however, families today tend to have fewer children and the incidence of one-person households is rising. Both in Torino and in Göteborg, the second wave of immigration does not have the labour force profile of the former; instead, these immigrants face a situation of economic crisis and unemployment. They also tend to become concentrated in specific areas of the cities, which makes integration into society much more difficult.<sup>54</sup>

## 5.2 Segregation as a multidimensional phenomenon

On the basis of the developments outlined above, discussions of segregation have often taken on a strong ethnic dimension. It may be important therefore to emphasise that economic and social differentiation are still the main factors underlying housing segregation in many larger cities, even if an ethnic aspect has definitely been added, especially with the second wave of immigration. In Sweden, a recent official government report defines the situation as serious, stating that we are dealing with an economic, social, ethnic and demographic segregation that has been noticeably reinforced in recent years. “The prevalent picture that segregation is mainly ethnic is not correct; what has developed is a clear economic and social segregation.”<sup>55</sup> Segregation is hence understood as a phenomenon with many dimensions. In this light, the physical separation can be seen as a manifestation of social distance between different population groups.

Göteborg and Torino have developed differently in this respect. In Göteborg, as in other larger Swedish cities, the Million Programme housing areas at the periphery of the cities have become increasingly problematic. Combined with a high level of immigration, unemployment, economic crisis and welfare cuts have led to a drastic change and decline of living conditions in many of these areas. Their profile today is one of a comparatively young population, with many foreign born, many unemployed and a high degree of social assistance recipients.<sup>56</sup> In Torino, the suburban working-class areas built during the industrial immigration years are characterised by high unemployment and a comparatively young population. On the other hand, many newly-arrived immigrants, as well as elderly living in poverty, are concentrated in areas in the centre of the city, where housing is typically old and run down. The centre and the periphery in Torino hence show somewhat different aspects of degradation and population composition.<sup>57</sup> The spatial segregation discussed in the text is clearer in Göteborg, mainly due to the clear geographical separation of the Million Programme areas from the centre of the city. In Torino, the picture is more complex, and poverty-stricken or decaying areas or even single streets can be interspersed with “normal” areas.

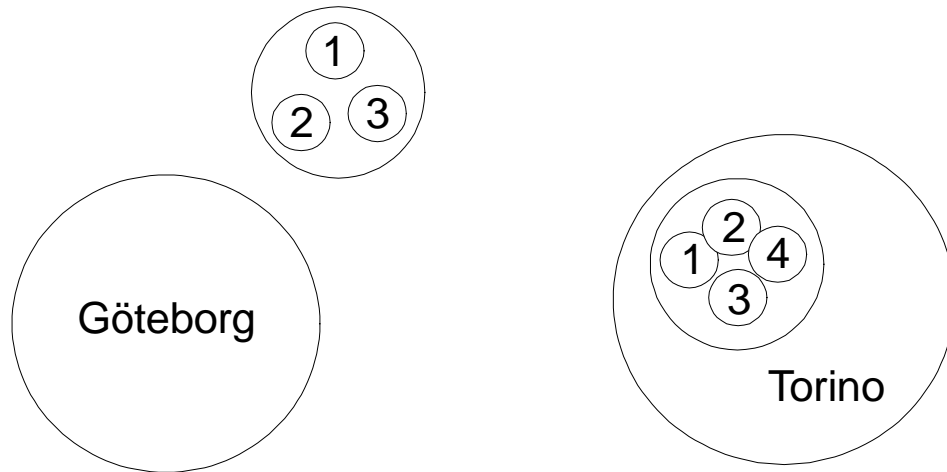
### 5.3 Local welfare arrangements

The mothers participating in the project live in a situation where the labour market structure is changing and the level of unemployment is relatively high. This has affected them more negatively than many other groups with stronger connections to the labour market. Welfare systems have at the same time been undergoing changes and cuts. In Göteborg and Torino, within city decentralisation in the provision and coordination of social services is prominent.<sup>58</sup> In Sweden, municipalities have the main responsibility for social services. The level of public institutionalisation is generally high, which traditionally has left little space for the third sector. This condition is however changing, and the role of voluntary organisations, as well as the family, has increased where the public sector has withdrawn. “Non-traditional solutions to social problems” is also a prominent part of the development programmes mentioned in Chapter 3 above. It remains to be seen whether and how that approach influences the relationship between various welfare actors. In Italy, the great diversity is more the consequence of a historical absence of national guidelines and legal obligations, as well as a marked localism. In Torino, however, the city councils have developed a high profile in dealing with poverty issues, hence substituting for the lack of national regulations. An “integrated” model has been developed in the city, in which the voluntary sector works closely together with the public one, often by contracting out.<sup>59</sup> In both cities, monetary benefits and the quality of services offered can vary between areas.

### 5.4 Choice of areas

The areas in the project were chosen on the basis of their socio-economic profile and my interest in living conditions in urban peripheral areas. Lone mothers in working-class areas are arguably affected earlier and more clearly by changes in the labour market and welfare systems. Housing conditions are specific, for example in the sense that most apartments are rented and the areas tend to have large-scale buildings. The population composition is also specific and, especially in the Swedish case, accompanied by relatively high mobility. All these factors influence the mothers’ local neighbourhoods and therefore also their subsistence possibilities.

Göteborg is divided into 21 district city committees (*stadsdelsnämnder*). Torino is divided into ten departments (*circonscrizioni*). Since Torino is a larger city to begin with, it follows that a *circonscrizione* is larger than a *stadsdelsnämnd*. In both cases, however, these are the institutional units closest to the citizen, the administrative representatives of the local welfare state. In Göteborg, the Lärjedalen *stadsdelsnämnd* was chosen for the project, in Torino the fifth department (*circonscrizione 5*). Before presenting the empirical results, it may be useful to present in a very simplified manner the geographical composition of the areas in the project, since this greatly influences the mothers’ situations.<sup>60</sup>



In the Swedish case, Lärjedalen is actually situated *outside* Göteborg, close to the city but still detached. Also the areas within Lärjedalen – Hammarkullen, Hjällbo and Eriksbo – are separate from each other, the borders of each are well-defined and there is some distance and “nature” between them. In the Italian case, Circonscrizione 5 is situated within the city. Within the department, the borders between the different areas – Vallette, Lucento, Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria – are diffuse, and it is often difficult to say where one area ends and the next starts. The possible exception is the Vallette area, which is somewhat detached from the rest of the city and comes closer to the “Swedish” profile. As a consequence, the Italian areas in the study are more mixed and have a more “urban” atmosphere.

## 6. The Göteborg study – Lärjedalen<sup>61</sup>

Lärjedalen is situated in north-eastern Göteborg and is the largest of Göteborg’s 21 city district committees.

### Population and households

Lärjedalen has 20,700 inhabitants. Their number is increasing steadily and in recent years has included a large number of refugees, mainly in Hjällbo and Hammarkullen. At the same time there has been an exogenous migration movement, mainly consisting of Swedish families and more established immigrant groups. As a result, the social structure has changed quite dramatically over the last five years. The population in Lärjedalen is comparatively young: one-third of the inhabitants are less than 20 years old. More children and young people in relation to total population live here than anywhere else in Göteborg. The proportion of senior citizens is low, compared to the rest of Göteborg, but they are increasing in number. More than half of those living in Lärjedalen are of foreign origin, and more than one hundred nationalities are represented in the district. Of the inhabitants who are not of Swedish origin, most come from the former Yugoslavia, a large group is from Finland and many come from Iran, Iraq and Somalia.

The latest information available on the composition of households in Lärjedalen is from 1990, when the population consisted of 7,844 households. The same year, 514 households (6.6% of all) consisted of single-mother families. This proportion has probably remained stable or increased. The proportion of lone parents with children is almost twice as large in Lärjedalen as in Göteborg as a whole. The gender make-up in the district is quite equal; 50.6% male and 49.4% female.

## Housing

Approximately 75% of Lärjedalen's 8,400 apartments are in blocks built almost exclusively during the years 1961-70. Companies in the public housing sector own more than 50% of the apartments, while 32% are owned by co-operative (tenant owners') building societies and private home-owners. Little more than a fourth of the dwellings consist of detached houses, mainly located in the countryside outside the project area. Detached houses are interspersed also in for example Hammarkullen, but generally these areas are characterised by the Million Programme architecture described above. Over the last years, quite extensive efforts have been made to improve the living environment in the three project areas.

## Social structure

The city district council characterises 60% of the households in Lärjedalen as "working-class households" (*arbetarhushåll*), while 25% are characterised as "white-collar households" (*tjänstemannahushåll*). The median income is lower than that of the average Göteborg citizen, and the proportion of high-income earners is well below the municipal average. Families receiving social assistance are more than twice as common in Lärjedalen as in Göteborg overall.

### **6.1 Hammarkullen, Hjällbo and Eriksbo - the greater neighbourhood.**

The three housing areas in the project belong to the same city district committee, i.e. the same economic and administrative framework. As Million Programme housing areas, they have been subject to the same external strains in the form of market fluctuations, changed housing policies or refugee policies. At the same time, the development of each area has been somewhat different and today each has its own specific character. The typical physical form of these areas is also of interest to the project: they are characterised by large-scale housing, quite commonly several estates within the same area and they normally have one common centre where services are concentrated. Since the areas are normally detached from the city as well as from other areas, inhabitants are largely dependent upon the service level in the own area centre.

As mentioned above, an important aspect of the programmes implemented in economically-vulnerable areas in recent years is the active involvement of the inhabitants themselves in the development of their areas. The Swedish project areas also have a tradition of many inhabitants being politically or culturally active in different ways, and there is a tradition of a relatively high degree of self-administration.

Hammarkullen is the largest of the three areas with approximately 6,500 inhabitants. Within the area there is a differentiation between smaller estates, ranging from eight-storey buildings, to three-storey buildings, to row houses and detached houses. Hjällbo is the poorest and most segregated area of the three (both socio-economically and ethnically). Even though Hjällbo also consists of several smaller estates, the area is much more homogenous and continuous than Hammarkullen. Approximately 5,000 persons live in Hjällbo. The administrative offices of the Lärjedalen city district committee are here, along with a bank and a post office. Because of this people from other areas have errands in Hjällbo, and the centre is typically busy. With a little over 1,000 apartments, Eriksbo is the smallest of the three areas; it lies clearly detached from its surroundings and gives the impression of being slightly isolated. Apartment buildings are smaller than in Hammarkullen and Hjällbo, 3-4 stories high, and the whole area is homogenous. Today the central area in Eriksbo has some service functions, but these are very local and directed toward those living in the area.

In spite of the high mobility in the project areas, many of the mothers in the study have lived there for a long time. It is not unusual to have moved within and between the three areas. Almost 40% of the mothers in the study have lived in the same area for more than ten years, and over 60% have lived in the same place for more than six years. The absolute majority of the mothers (82%) say that they like their areas very much and are content living there. There is however a growing discontent behind these numbers, and many mothers say that things “were better before”. The accelerated changes during later years, with increasing mobility and number of immigrants, have led many mothers to say that they do not quite recognise their neighbourhoods any more.

The same pattern can be discerned regarding service. The mothers feel that for example school and child care functioned better previously, and the cuts during the 1990s have led to noticeable deterioration. The majority of mothers in the study were dissatisfied with the stores in their areas, the main problem being that food and everyday commodities were too expensive. Since the areas are somewhat isolated, they have to travel a bit to get to cheaper alternatives. In order to save money the mothers therefore have to invest quite a lot of time and energy, travelling by bus or tram, sometimes with one or more children, to do their shopping. Because of this they often “have to” use the local shops, a factor which influences their economy. As for post and bank services, mothers were relatively dissatisfied as well. Here, however, the lack of service is a lesser problem, since in Sweden it is very common to take care of “normal” errands by mail (so-called giro service). Bills are paid in this way, and wages or allowances are paid directly into a bank account. One is therefore rarely “forced” to go to the post or bank offices, so these errands do not generally take up a lot of time.

How the housing administration works is important to the mothers in the Swedish project, since they live in public housing. Almost 60% say they are satisfied with the service offered. Reasons for dissatisfaction are having to wait too long for home maintenance or repairs, spread equally over the three areas (run by three different housing companies). The mothers hence express expectations of the housing administration,



they are well aware of their rights and duties as tenants, and contact with the administration is normally quite regular.

Half of the mothers say that they are satisfied with child care and school, while around one-third say that they have no opinion about these issues. More mothers claim to be dissatisfied with the school (27%) than with child care (19%), mainly due to increased insecurity and violence reported by the children in all three areas in recent years. Health care gets a good rating: 74% of the mothers say that they think the services work well and only 12% are dissatisfied. Communications and transportation, finally, get very good grades from mothers in Hammarkullen and Hjällbo, while mothers in Eriksbo are dissatisfied, largely because the Eriksbo area is more isolated than the other two and the mothers there have to depend on infrequent bus service.

## **6.2 The small neighbourhood**

The design of Swedish peripheral housing areas is relevant to the mothers in the project. Large- and small-scale buildings in the project areas are normally built around a common court or garden, with the entrances to the buildings facing this common space. For example, though Eriksbo is a homogenous area it is quite large and consists of several smaller courts. These subdivisions within the housing area, often accompanied by common spaces for each section, contribute to a feeling of home and security. The areas closest to the own home, the yard or stairwell, constitute “the small neighbourhood” described in Chapter 4, the space within which people tend to construct their closest neighbourhood contacts and networks. The physical organisation of the housing areas in the project are thus important for the social organisation of a small neighbourhood. A common yard with playground for the children, benches and tables, and a common laundry room are all aspects that facilitate contact between neighbours. It might be symptomatic that the two areas where networks were more developed and the mothers tended to have more active contact with their neighbours were in Eriksbo and an estate within Hammarkullen called Sandeslätt, where apartment buildings are smaller, with fewer families on each stairwell, and yards are smaller, contributing to an overview and feeling of “our yard”.<sup>62</sup> The general tradition in the project areas of being politically, socially or culturally active, involved in the own area through e.g. associations or self-management, also influences the Swedish mothers’ situation. They thus find themselves in active small neighbourhoods, a fact which many of them identify as being quite relevant to their everyday life and which also influences choice of strategies.

## 7. The Torino study – Circonscrizione 5

Circonscrizione 5 is situated in north-western Torino. It is the second largest of Torino's 10 departments.

### Population and households

Nearly 124,000 persons, or almost 14% of Torino's total population, live in Circonscrizione 5.<sup>63</sup> As in the Swedish project area, the social structure of the area has changed noticeably during the 1990s. The population has decreased steadily, and even though this is true for the city as a whole, the project area shows one of the most greatest decreases in Torino (in 1991 128,000 persons lived in Circonscrizione 5).<sup>64</sup> The situation is hence the opposite of the one described above for Lärjedalen regarding demographic development. A general trend in Torino is also an ageing population, which has become pronounced in Circonscrizione 5 as well; between 1993 and 1997 the population between 0-17 years decreased by almost 12%, while the proportion of those above the age of 75 increased by more than 17%.<sup>65</sup> The highest proportion of elderly is however still to be found in the centre of Torino, which means that Circonscrizione 5 has a comparatively young population. Regarding immigration, in recent years the number of immigrants has been growing also in areas other than the city centre. Again, however, the centre still has the largest proportion, confirming the overall picture presented in Chapter 5 (a larger proportion of elderly and immigrants in the centre as compared to peripheral areas).<sup>66</sup>

In 1991 (last population census) the gender make-up in the Circonscrizione showed slightly more females, an imbalance that increased somewhat in the following years. In that same year, mothers living alone with their children constituted 6.1% of the households in the Circonscrizione, a level that corresponded to the situation in the rest of the city. Lone-mother families thus do not seem to be more common in the project area than in the city as a whole.

### Housing

Circonscrizione 5 may be considered an intermediate area, traditionally strongly working class, but still not among the most run-down peripheral areas.<sup>67</sup> The department overall has a more city-like and mixed composition than the Swedish detached and well-defined project areas. Large-scale housing is most prominent in Vallette and Lucento, which were also built more recently (mainly during the 1960s) in response to the industrial immigration from the south. The department has a comparatively high degree of overcrowding, i.e. more than one occupant per room, probably partly because small apartments (1-3 rooms) are relatively common. A full 52% of residents in Circonscrizione 5 own their homes, while 44% rent. In 1991, 2-3% of housing units lacked facilities like bathroom and heating or had an outdoor WC.<sup>68</sup>

### Social structure

The working-class population in Circonscrizione 5 far outweighs the middle-class population. The area has a higher percentage of persons with no or low educational qualifications than Torino as a whole.<sup>69</sup> The same was true for amount of unemployed (16%) in 1991.<sup>70</sup> It is however not the city's poorest nor most

socially assisted department<sup>71</sup> As in other working-class areas in Torino, middle-class population is also interspersed in the project area. The mixed physical structure of Circonscrizione 5 hence corresponds to a partly mixed population (more noticeably towards the centre of Torino, for example in Borgo Vittoria).

### **7.1 Vallette, Lucento, Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria – the greater neighbourhood**

The city-like and mixed design of the Italian project areas and the unclear borders between them (as well as between the *circonscrizione* and the rest of the city) mean that the Italian mothers find themselves in a somewhat different situation than their Swedish counterparts. Regarding services such as child care, schools and health care, they are largely restricted to their districts, since the interdepartmental division of social services generally follows these divisions. As for other services however, such as shops, banks, post offices, markets, the choices are great. Because of time constraints, the Italian mothers too are somewhat constrained to the services closest to their homes. Alternatives are however easier to reach, and several low-price, large-scale food markets are located in the project districts.

The Vallette area is separate from the others (even if the borders between Vallette and Lucento are unclear) and the housing is large-scale and more like a housing estate than a city. The area has a common centre where social services, shops, market, church, etc. are located. As in the Swedish areas, this physical composition of the area influences the mothers' everyday life: for alternative food shops, etc., they have to travel a bit, since they are not within walking distance. This large neighbourhood is therefore slightly different from the three other, more urban ones. Popular housing streets or blocks are interspersed within Lucento, Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria. The construction density increases the closer one gets to the centre of Torino; Vallette is not so densely built, and the density then increases through Lucento and Madonna di Campagna. Borgo Vittoria has the most urban atmosphere of the four.

More than 30% of the Italian mothers have lived in their areas for more than ten years, while 56% have lived there more than five years. The absolute majority of the 25 mothers in the Italian study (88%) like the area they live in. The interviewees do however sometimes distinguish between the neighbourhood and their own apartment: some would have liked higher standards in their own home even if they are content with the area they live in. The mothers who are dissatisfied with their neighbourhoods are often very dissatisfied, usually because the neighbourhood is considered dangerous, especially for children. These neighbourhoods are all *case popolari* where drugs and criminality were said to be prevalent and mothers feared for their children to the extent that they kept them in the house rather than letting them out to play.

The majority of the mothers (76%) are content with shops, including prices. Many say that they find smaller shops close to their homes a bit expensive, but that they can shop in the cheaper food markets instead without too much trouble. The dissatisfied mothers are mainly in Vallette, confirming the experience of the Swedish mothers where alternatives to the local stores are difficult to get to. All but four mothers are also satisfied with post and bank services. In Italy these chores can take some time, as bills and

other errands are usually taken care of in person and the wait can be quite long. The possibility to choose to a certain extent when to go, since many mothers have several alternatives close to the own home, alleviates some of the inconvenience.

Sixty per cent of the interviewees say they are satisfied with the housing administration, while the others are either very dissatisfied or have no opinion. Unlike the Swedish mothers, the Italian mothers seem to have no expectations of the housing administration. They say they are responsible themselves for everything within the own apartment; satisfaction or dissatisfaction has to do with how common areas such as stairwells are taken care of. Seventy-two per cent of the mothers rent their apartments while 20% (5 persons) own theirs; the remaining two persons live with their parents. Many apartments I visited were quite worn; the general standard is lower than in the Swedish sample. I have also seen very nice homes of women who were able to afford it privately, but there does not seem to be any "right" to a minimum standard. One should remember that several of the women in the study live in public housing (*casa popolare*), and as we have seen above there is quite a great difference between public housing in the two project countries. Many interviewees also live in overcrowded conditions, sharing a bedroom with the children in several cases.

Most Italian mothers (68-76%) claim to be content with child care, school and health care. It was common here to add that these services had functioned better previously; a decline in the functioning of health care were particularly mentioned (the most common complaint being that doctors have to treat too many children today and have less time for house calls). Regarding child care, mothers clearly distinguished between care for children between the ages of 0-3 years (*asili nido*) and for children aged 3-6 (*scuola materna*). The *asili* were considered to be too few and too expensive. *Scuola materna* was said to function well, even though the opening hours for both this kind of care and the elementary schools were said to be far too short, with very limited access to after-school care, which led to problems for working mothers in particular. They had to depend on parents or others to help them, otherwise it would not be possible for them to work full-time. Lone mothers in the Italian sample had a younger overall profile than the Swedish one (see below), so problems concerning the care of younger children were in their case discussed more than problems with teenage children (such as violence in the schools, fears that the children would take drugs, etc.)

The majority of the mothers were content with communications. The urban character of the project areas generally led to more alternatives for inhabitants. The exception to this rule was, again, Vallette, even though several Vallette mothers claimed to be content.

## 7.2 The small neighbourhood

The small neighbourhoods in the Italian project areas are quite different from the Swedish ones, which has to do with the urban and more densely constructed and populated areas in the Italian case. The Italian project areas are not constructed in a way that facilitates contact between neighbours, and very few

interviewees know their neighbours at all. Playgrounds for children and “meeting areas” such as common yards with benches and tables are rare in Circonscrizione 5; those that do exist are normally not in immediate proximity to the own home. No Italian mothers, in fact, say that they are in any way involved in their local neighbourhood, and only 20% are members of some kind of organisation or network. Interviewees in the Vallette area came closest to their Swedish counterparts with a feeling of “our area”, probably, again, because of the detached location of the neighbourhood. It was however difficult to distinguish any clear “small neighbourhoods” within the area; “neighbourhood identity” seemed to be connected to Vallette as a whole. Absence of neighbourhood networks depends not only on the physical structure of an area; it became quite clear in the Italian interviews that the women did not generally wish to have more contact with neighbours or be involved in the neighbourhood. Networks of interchange and support were built with the family of origin if they also lived in Torino. In many cases, the mothers felt quite isolated socially. At the same time, the Italian mothers in the study were less isolated from the rest of city than the Swedish mothers because of the geographical location of their larger neighbourhoods. This condition can be positive in the sense that it leaves them a wider or more accessible geographical framework within which to work out their daily strategies, and makes them less restricted to their small neighbourhoods than might be the case for the mothers in the Swedish sample.

## **8. Lone mothers in a local Swedish context**

### Who are the mothers in the study?

The interviewees in the Swedish study are divided quite equally over the three project areas Hammarkullen, Hjällbo and Eriksbo. For country of origin we used the somewhat rough classification “Sweden”, “Europe” and “rest of the world”. The material can be said to correspond quite well to the overall situation in Lärjedalen, with 44% born in Sweden and a fairly equal division between immigrants from Europe and the rest of the world. The proportion of immigrants from Europe has increased during the 1990s, due to the war in the former Yugoslavia and the economic and political changes in Eastern Europe. Immigrant mothers participating in the Swedish study have lived in Sweden between 5 and 30 years. The majority (62%) have lived in the country for more than ten years. This is mirrored in most of the replies, as the interviewees appeared to know the Swedish society/system well.

That the mothers have between one and three children is, not surprisingly, the most common situation. Most common are mothers with two children, but there are families in the selected group with as many as seven children. The age distribution is quite equal over the age categories: the largest group is children between 7 and 14 years, followed by the group between 15 and 20 years. In contrast to the Italian mothers (see below), none of the mothers in the Swedish study had children over the age of 25 living with them.

There were only ten children below the age of three in the selection. I see this fact as important and relevant for the mothers' possibilities to elaborate subsistence strategies. There is naturally a great difference between having teenage children and having small children. The number of children arguably also strongly influences the mothers' subsistence possibilities. However, while smaller children tend to limit the mothers' choices, they can also contribute to network-creating activities in the neighbourhood. Studies have shown that parents of small/school children tend to be involved in the own housing area and develop networks with neighbours. This in turn influences possibilities and choices in various ways, for example through exchange of child care and other services. The fact that there is a slight bias towards older children in the selection is explained by the mothers' age: fully 50% are in the age group 40-50 years. The women's age is an important factor when we look at possibilities and limitations for subsistence, for example concerning connection to the labour market.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

	N	%
1	17	23
2	33	44
3	15	20
4	4	5
5	4	5
6	-	-
7	2	3
Total	75	100

AGE OF CHILDREN

Age	N	%
0-3	10	8
4-6	16	12
7-14	46	36
15-20	36	28
20+	20	16

AGE OF MOTHER

Age	N	%
20-29	10	13
30-39	24	32
40-49	39	52
50-59	2	3
Total	75	100

Most of the mothers in the study live alone with all their children. In a little more than one-third of the cases not all children remain in the home, and in three cases the mother has shared custody with the children's father. In all three cases each parent keeps the children one week at a time. As mentioned in the introduction, other adults besides the mother may also live in the household, for example the interviewee's mother or other relatives. This is of interest to the interviewees' subsistence possibilities, since this person potentially may help not only with the children and the household, but also financially. How the presence of another adult affects the household depends on who this person is. In some cases, the presence of the other adult can imply more work for the interviewee, for example if this person is elderly or ill.

Three of the mothers in the Swedish study have new partners. In two of the cases the couples are married. In spite of this the mothers firmly insist on defining themselves as lone mothers. Their argument is that they are alone in *parenthood*, even if they have a new relationship. In spite of the marriage, according to the information given by the mothers, the household economy is completely divided and the man has no responsibility whatsoever for the children. In one case the interviewee did not even ask her husband to baby-sit, because he had "nothing to do with her children". It is apparent that these couples saw family

obligations as not automatically implying responsibility for the partners' children even if the couple is in fact married. This is an approach to "reconstructed families" that has support in Swedish law in the sense that the "new man" in the house does not have any legal responsibilities towards his "new children". This also means that for the children in the interviewees' households there is a "real" father somewhere in the background who has financial responsibility for the children even if they do not have regular contact. All this implies the possibility of a very complex web of family relations. The mothers in the study have obviously seen it as a rational choice to continue in most practical aspects to be lone parents, and separate that role more or less completely from the emotional relationship they are involved in with another adult.

The educational range among the mothers in the study is large, from no education (one person) to university degree. Twenty per cent of the mothers have only compulsory schooling, while a full third of those participating in the project have finished secondary education (gymnasium). Mothers with compulsory or secondary schooling only constitute 55%, i.e. somewhat more than half of the selection. Of the remaining interviewees, 19% have a university degree and 25% have completed some kind of vocational training or other post-secondary education. It is important to note that the mothers in the last category can have very different educational experiences, both with regard to the length and the aim of education. A total of 45% of the mothers thus have post-secondary education in some form.

Slightly more than 90% of those participating in the project state that they have or have had some kind of wage labour after finishing education. Five mothers (7%) state that they have never been employed. These mothers are in the younger age groups, which confirms a Swedish development during the 1990s where younger people have been particularly hit by increasing unemployment and have difficulties entering the labour market.

ACTIVITY AT TIME OF THE INTERVIEW

Present activity	N	%
gainful employment	31	41
education	9	12
unemployed	21	28
early retirement pension	5	7
sick leave	2	3
parental leave	5	7
other	2	3
Total	75	100

OCCUPATION AT TIME OF THE INTERVIEW

Type	N	%
unskilled worker	30	42
lower-level white-collar employee	9	13
skilled worker	20	28
mid-level white-collar employee	12	17
Total	70	100

Regarding present activity, the mothers divide principally into the categories "wage labour", "unemployed" and "education". The group of unemployed amounts to 28%, which is very high, but the questions have not been put in a way that enables us to rule out the possibility that some of those defining themselves as unemployed at the same time participate in different kinds of workfare activities. Some of the mothers who

participate in workfare activities may also be found in the group “education”. It is however likely that the number of unemployed is indeed comparatively very high, probably due to a combination of “negative” factors in relation to the labour market for the women in the study (such as lone parenthood, housing area, low education and foreign origins). Participation in workfare activities probably cannot explain the whole difference between the mothers in the study and the population as a whole.

The interviewees’ replies regarding type of occupation have been divided into four categories.<sup>72</sup> From them it may be inferred that none of the mothers in the study has a “highly qualified” occupation, but that they are divided between low and medium levels of qualification. Blue-collar or worker occupations are much more common than white-collar. Many of these occupations are within the care and service sectors (for example medical orderly, cleaning, shop assistant or cashier). Examples of white-collar occupations in the sample are office clerk or teacher. Seventy-four per cent of the employed mothers state that they work full-time, whereas 26% work part-time.

Workfare policies are of specific interest to the project, since they can be of great significance to people who have a weak connection to the labour market. Sixty-one per cent of the Swedish mothers have participated (or are participating) in workfare policies of some kind.

“It has been no bed of roses”. About the constant struggle to make ends meet.

Only 41% of the mothers in the study were involved in wage labour at the time of the interview. If we add those persons to the group presently involved in some kind of education, we end up at 53%. The rest of the mothers survive on some kind of benefit, and those who work or study must also normally complement their incomes with benefits. All but two mothers in the study receive some kind of allowance. The most common kind of allowances are maintenance advance, child allowance and housing allowance. The women in the project are responsible for the maintenance of one or more children. What does their economy look like and how do they make ends meet?

If we start with the women’s own perception and definition of their situation, a clear picture of economic problems emerges. The majority of the mothers in the sample state that their economic situation is bad, to say the least, or as one woman put it: “Don’t you have any alternative for catastrophic?!”

PERCEPTION OF OWN  
ECONOMIC SITUATION

	N	%
good	16	21
bad	51	68
neither/nor	8	11
Total	75	100

TOTAL INCOME PER MONTH  
BEFORE TAXES

SEK	N	%	EURO
6000-9000	8	11	667-1000
9000-12000	21	28	1000-1333
12000-15000	25	33	1333-1667
15000-18000	6	8	1667-2000
18000+	15	20	2000+
Total	75	100	



If we look at actually-stated income, we see that most mothers end up in the category 12-15,000 SEK per month. Whether this is a good or bad income naturally depends upon number of children and monthly expenses, among other things. In general, however, it can be said that the medium income among the mothers is low. In the Swedish interviews mothers were asked about total income including all kinds of support or benefits *before tax*.<sup>73</sup> Seventy-two per cent give a total monthly income under 15,000 SEK, which has to be considered low. On the other hand, there is no direct connection between income and conception of economic situation. Two persons with the same income could apprehend their situation quite differently.

Nineteen per cent of the working mothers in the study stated that they occasionally worked extra to make incomes go further. Of the mothers not involved in wage labour at the time of the interview, 26% stated that they were occasionally involved in casual work. It was difficult to obtain any concrete information regarding how many extra hours these mothers worked, but half of them stated less than five hours a week, while the majority of the rest stated between six and ten hours. Several mothers stated that they would have liked to work extra had it been possible, but that they could not because they had no one to look after the children. Much of this extra work was definitely informal, i.e. not reported and not found through formal channels (for example cleaning or fortune-telling).

A consistently low income and lack of economic margins mean that many of the mothers in the project live in a precarious economic situation. This is mirrored in the replies regarding economic setbacks and debts. As many as 77% of the mothers in the sample state that they have been affected by financial emergencies in recent years and 80% state that they have debts.

LONE MOTHERS REPORTING FINANCIAL EMERGENCIES

	N	%
Yes	57	77
No	18	23
Total	75	100

LONE MOTHERS WITH DEBTS

	N	%
Yes	60	80
No	15	20
Total	75	100

The financial emergencies that the mothers have faced can be more or less comprehensive. Many women mention the divorce itself as an economic setback that they have never quite recovered from. Other examples are loans that have not been paid back in time, dental problems that had to be taken care of or large telephone bills.

A common cause for economic problems for the Swedish mothers is delays in payments from the welfare system, most often the regional social insurance office. This can happen when a person moves from one "status" to another, for example when beginning or ending a workfare programme or when moving to a larger or smaller apartment. On these occasions the "system" is seen as very bureaucratic and several

mothers have told stories of how, as a consequence of delayed payments, they have received less income one month, which has led to accumulated problems and falling behind with bills and debts. Waiting periods before one is eligible for benefits are a great problem for people who do not have safety margins or savings.

The problems described above are illustrated by two mothers in the study who related that they had lost both child allowance and maintenance advance when the oldest child turned 19. The housing allowance changed at the same time, which meant a drastic cut in income of about 2,000 SEK (222 EURO), according to the mothers. This illustrates the problem indicated in the introduction. The system expects a 19-year-old to contribute to the family income, rather than constitute an expense, which is of course problematic in light of the youth unemployment mentioned above. There is also a general tendency for young people to remain in education longer due to a changed labour market and increased competition. At the same time, social services tend to encourage young people who do not have their own income to stay with their family of origin, a relatively new attitude in Sweden based on a discussion about whether or not to grant social assistance to young people without incomes who want to leave the parental home.<sup>74</sup>

The debts that the mothers in the study declare range from owing relatives or friends a little money to quite extensive bank or credit debts. Study loan debts are not unusual. The mothers who do not have any debts underline how they have fought to avoid it. It seems important to these women to have “made it by themselves” and not to be a “burden” to anyone else.

Barely half of the mothers state that they give and/or receive financial help from family and relatives and a little more than half state that this help exists between neighbours and friends. Many of the mothers who said that they are not involved in that kind of economic interchange have explained that these persons too find themselves in such a precarious economic situation that there is no use in asking. Such economic interchange ranges from quite comprehensive help (often the parents of the interviewee) to a little help in crisis situations. Those who are regularly involved in that kind of interchange say that they could not make it without that possibility. Others choose not to have any form of economic exchange with family, neighbours and friends.

It is relatively unusual for the children in the family to work and contribute to the family income. Sixteen per cent replied yes to that question. In some of these cases the children had summer jobs and earned some extra money that they used themselves (which of course means fewer expenses for the mother). In other cases the child's income was calculated in the household budget.

To gain a fuller understanding of the mothers' economic margins we asked if they would be able to raise 7,000 SEK (778 EURO) within a week in a real crisis situation. The majority of the mothers replied no. The lack of margins became evident also in other ways during the conversation. For instance, it is not unusual for an interviewee to have declined visits to the dentist or doctor in spite of need.

Among the mothers who thought that they would be able to raise money in a crisis situation, the most common way stated was borrowing from family and relatives. Some mothers replied that they would go to the bank. It should be remembered that one must have a job to be able to borrow from a bank. Some interviewees indicated a combination of sources to raise the sum, meaning that it would not be possible to get it all in one place.

### Living as a lone mother – relations to the surrounding world.

Almost half of the mothers in the project felt that they had never been treated in any particular way by society at large because of living alone with their children. It is exactly this lack of particular treatment that some mothers classify as good treatment. The fact that lone motherhood is not perceived as a relevant factor in relationships with others is underlined by many immigrant women as something very positive when compared to their home country, where according to these mothers lone motherhood is much more stigmatised (for example Chile, Bosnia, Poland and Syria). The strong degree of stigmatisation that emerges in research on lone mothers in for example Great Britain and the United States thus does not seem to correspond to the way mothers in Sweden and Lärjedalen perceive their situation.<sup>75</sup>

Almost one-third of the mothers however have said that they have been treated badly or condescendingly. Normally specific situations or relations are mentioned here, such as the contact with the children's school. Two of the mothers claimed to have been denied bank loans with direct reference to their status as lone parents. Others speak in more vague and general terms of "people looking down at you" or "feeling sorry for you".

In the project we asked the mothers how they view their contact with local authorities, such as the unemployment office, social services and the regional social insurance office. In their replies, interviewees often use words such as "bureaucratic", "impersonal" and "correct"; that is, they do not say that they have been treated or received badly, but they have also not felt any greater understanding for their situation. The interviewees normally made a distinction here between the authority and the administrative official; the interpretation of the treatment tends to depend on the personal contact with the authority representative. Many women say that even if they received help in the end, they had to fight for it, and that it feels wrong that you should only get help if you "scream and shout". According to these mothers, contact with authorities generally demands much time and energy. Several women say that even if they were treated well, they did not receive any concrete help. These women express a great degree of resignation as to the authorities' possibilities to help in practice, especially in the unemployment office; those who work say that they found their jobs through private channels.

## The personal networks

*“We borrow money from each other. And when we don’t have money we borrow food.”*

For the mothers in the project it is important how the small neighbourhood works and whether they have personal networks. When material resources are scarce, it is probable that the informal sphere becomes particularly significant both for subsistence possibilities and quality of life.

When asked about their social contacts and interaction, most mothers in the study mentioned family (68%) and/or friends (58%). One-third of the mothers stated that they see their neighbours regularly. The share of interviewees who stated that they frequent their neighbours is somewhat larger in Eriksbo than in Hammarkullen and Hjällbo. The majority of the mothers in the study (84%) also stated that they had someone to confide in, i.e. one or more persons with whom they had a deeper relationship than mere acquaintance or social friendship. These persons were normally close friends, but also quite often persons in the family of origin (most commonly a mother or a sister). Twelve women in the sample say that they do not have anyone to confide in, and that they therefore feel very isolated at times.

The mothers were also asked to whom they turn for help with money, practical favours, good advice and company and support. What possible interchange is there with the personal network and where do the mothers turn to solve everyday problems? As shown above, the possibilities of economic help vary. Most mothers in the sample would still primarily turn to their family (58%) or friends (29%) for help with money. Some mothers (13%) say they have no one to turn to for financial help.

The same pattern can be discerned regarding help with practical issues such as repairs, removal or purchasing. Most interviewees reply family and friends here too (38 and 37% respectively), but some would also ask their neighbours. It is probably more socially acceptable to ask your neighbours for this kind of help than it is to ask for monetary loans. Here too, many reply that they prefer to take care of things themselves and do not normally ask for help (24%).

Also on the question regarding good advice, friends and family are the most common categories (37 and 29%). Some mothers comment that it depends on what kind of advice they need. Sometimes they might turn to authorities, while they turn to the private network regarding personal issues. Twenty-six per cent of the mothers reply that they never ask anybody’s advice. On the question regarding company and support, the primary reply is friends (47%), but also family (31%). It might be interpreted as somewhat disheartening that 27 mothers, that is a full third, say that they do not have anybody to turn to for company and support. This can naturally also be a conscious choice, but the general impression in the conversations is that these mothers miss someone to talk to.

There is a connection between the replies given to the above questions in the sense that mothers who have economic exchange with their networks also tend to have an interchange of practical favours and generally socialise more outside the own family. Networks between neighbours and friends are clearer at Sandeslätt in Hammarkullen and in Eriksbo. For many mothers in these areas it appears to be an estab-

lished part of everyday life to borrow money and other things from each other and to exchange practical favours. The access to different kinds of exchange has become a part of these women's subsistence strategies and the network can be said to function as a safety net. In Eriksbo, for example, some mothers related that they used to cook together when they had little money. The importance of networks was underlined by several mothers in the Swedish study. One woman had great problems with her son and it was very difficult for her to handle the situation alone; she had to stop working for a while. After the difficult period she worked actively at building a network of friends and acquaintances in the neighbourhood and she says she is much better prepared to meet and overcome difficulties today. On the other hand, as mentioned above, some of the mothers have explained explicitly that they prefer to manage by themselves, both regarding material and more emotional aspects of life.

On the more comprehensive question whether the women felt that it was generally difficult to live as a lone mother, to make ends meet and organise everyday life, 69% said yes and 27% no. Four per cent stated that they have no opinion. Finances are a constant problem for the mothers in the project and some of them underline that they do not feel that it is the lone motherhood in itself that is problematic, but specifically the economic constraints. Others feel that finances are one thing, but that having sole responsibility for the family and the relative isolation this can lead to can be very difficult in the long run. Other mothers, in turn, say that they enjoy the sole responsibility, being able to decide themselves over time and money and not having to negotiate with another adult.

The mothers in the Swedish study are hence a heterogeneous group in many ways. Indicators such as unemployment and economic precariousness give quite a negative picture of the situation for many of them. Several also find themselves in a difficult situation regarding social isolation and ability to get on. At the same time, this picture is counterbalanced by another where we find both mothers with a strong connection to the labour market or educational system, and mothers who do not have these connections, but who have still managed to work out a life situation that they are content with. We now move on to a presentation of the Italian study.

## **9. Lone mothers in a local Italian context**

Who are the mothers in the study?

The Italian mothers are distributed over the four project areas, with more mothers from Vallette and Lucento than from Madonna di Campagna and Borgo Vittoria. No immigrant mothers participated in the Torino study, so "country of origin" became a superfluous category. In the Italian case it is however necessary to take another migratory experience into account, namely those who migrated to Torino from the south. A full 30% of the interviewees were born in southern Italy, mainly Sicily and Calabria. The remaining mothers were born in Torino. Of these, however, almost half have parents who come from the south.

This means not only that they have, according to themselves, grown up with a specific cultural framework, but also that they in a sense have lived the industrial labour migration experience, even if at second hand.

To have one or two children is most common in the Italian sample; only one mother has three children and none has more than that. The largest group of children is aged between 7-14 years, followed by those aged 4-6. In the Italian sample, “children” as old as 30 years (2) can be found, pointing to the pattern indicated in Chapter 2 that Italian children tend to move away from the parental home later than their Swedish counterparts. There are only four children under the age of three in the sample. In the Italian case this might be even more significant since, as we have seen, it is most difficult/expensive to arrange child care for children under three. Sixty per cent of the Italian mothers are in the age group 30-39 years; thus the sample has a somewhat younger overall profile than the Swedish one.

NUMBER OF CHILDREN

	N	%
1	13	52
2	11	44
3	1	4

AGE OF CHILDREN

	N	%
0-3	4	11
4-6	10	26
7-14	14	37
15-20	5	13
20+	5	13
Total	38	100

AGE OF MOTHER

	N	%
20-29	2	8
30-39	15	60
40-49	7	28
50-59	1	4

All Italian mothers lived with all their children, and the absolute majority was the only adult in the household. In two cases the interviewee lived with her parents (both parents in one case and only the mother in the other), and in one case she lived with a new partner. As in the Swedish cases, this woman firmly defined herself as a lone mother.

Education among the mothers ranged from compulsory schooling to “vocational training or other post gymnasium education”. None of the Italian mothers in the study has a university degree. A full 50% of the interviewees have compulsory schooling only, while 30% have post-secondary level. As in the Swedish sample, the form of training/schooling this implied could be quite varied. All Italian mothers in the project worked sometime after finished schooling, although their labour market experiences are quite varied and some have worked very little overall.

Seventy-six per cent were working at the time of the interview, and the remaining 24% were unemployed. These were the only two alternatives that emerged under “present activity” among the Italian mothers. Some of the unemployed were or had been involved in workfare activities, most commonly *cantieri di lavoro*.<sup>76</sup> Four categories are sufficient to capture the range of the interviewees’ occupations, divided into low and medium levels of qualification. Blue-collar or worker occupations are more common than white collar. Examples of the former are assistant for elderly or helper in school, while examples of the latter are

teacher or midwife. Seventy per cent of the working mothers work full-time and the remaining 21% work part-time. No mother works less than 20 hours per week. Two of the mothers openly and on their own initiative stated that they were illegally employed, with no contract and no social rights. Both had been employed in this condition for several years and were formally unemployed. They reported to the unemployment office once a year, and had never been offered a job.

OCCUPATION AT TIME OF THE INTERVIEW

Type	N	%
unskilled worker	7	37
lower-level white-collar employee	3	16
skilled worker	3	16
mid-level white-collar employee	6	31
Total	19	100

ACTIVITY AT TIME OF THE INTERVIEW

Present activity	N	%
gainful employment	19	76
unemployed	6	24

“It’s been hard – but I’ve made it!” How the Italian mothers make ends meet

As many as 76% of the mothers were working at the time of the interview. According to the interviewees, as well as other Italian studies, this has less to do with the Italian labour market’s friendliness towards lone mothers and more with sheer necessity. Many of the working mothers are very dependent upon their relatives to help with the children since child care and school hours do not correspond well with full time labour. In two cases the mother left her child with her parents for the whole working week, seeing him only on weekends. Many other interviewees were dependent upon parents or other relatives to drop off and/or fetch their children. To make ends meet financially, these mothers hence have to pay a high price in time.

A total of six women were unemployed at the time of the interview. Two of these were involved in workfare, which secured them an income for a while. Two made ends meet by working extra occasionally and two lived on allowances only. These were the poorest women in the study. Extensive interchange of goods and services with family and kin networks as well as help from voluntary organisations and the church were imperative for the survival of these families. Their living conditions (housing, clothes, food) were however very meagre. One woman I interviewed on a cold November day did not have heating in the home, an apartment with almost no furniture in a *casa popolare*. Even if this mother constitutes an extreme example, it is important to note that some do live under these conditions with their children. The woman in question was in regular contact with social services, since her only income consisted of social assistance.

## PERCEPTION OF OWN ECONOMIC SITUATION

	N	%
Good	12	48
Bad	13	52
Neither/nor	-	-
Total	25	100

## TOTAL INCOME PER MONTH (BEFORE TAXES)

LIRA (in 1,000)	N	%	EURO
0-600	4	16	0-310
600-1,200	2	8	310-620
1,200-1,800	11	44	620-930-
1,800-2,400	5	20	930-1240
2,400-3,000	2	8	1240-1550
3,000-3,600	-	-	1550-1860
3,600+	1	4	1860+
Total	25	100	

Half of the women in the study maintained that their economic situation was good. Among the other half, as in the Swedish study, the “bad” alternatives ranged from “could be better” to “catastrophic”. Most of the Italian mothers’ stated income fell into the category 1,200,000 – 1,800,000 lire. The median income level among the mothers in the Italian sample is low—indeed, two income categories had to be added below the lowest Swedish income level.<sup>77</sup> The result points to the fact that these women cannot live on formal incomes alone. While some of the mothers may be unwilling to tell me their actual income, some really do have a very low income: the home visits and personal interviews confirm a very low standard of living. Thirty-seven per cent of the mothers employed at the time of the interview said that they occasionally work extra to make incomes go farther. As can be seen below, in the sample there are also mothers who are doing quite well, those who own their homes and those who have good jobs that they are content with and that are possible to combine with care of the children.

Only 24% had ever participated in some kind of workfare activities. Many of the remaining mothers had tried to enter workfare programmes, but had not been considered needy enough.<sup>78</sup> The same problem was common for those who wanted to seek full or complementary help in the form of social assistance. In general, one has to be in a *very* precarious economic situation in order to receive assistance. Mothers who exceed the low ceiling for assistance or workfare tend to find themselves in a kind of “no man’s land”, where they are so poor that it is difficult to make ends meet, but at the same time they are not entitled to the help which is given to the poorest sections of the population.

Sixty-four per cent of the mothers receive some kind of allowance or benefit. Half of these women receive either alimony, family allowances or social assistance; the remainder receive some other kind of help, for instance invalidity pension for a handicapped child. *Only three of the mothers in the Italian sample receive maintenance payments from the fathers.* This seems to be a major factor in many mothers’ economic situation. The fathers who do pay generally help with extraordinary expenses such as visits to the dentist or winter clothes as well, which is of course imperative for the family’s economy. In order to make an unwilling father pay, the mother has to denounce him. There is a good likelihood that she will win the case if



she does, but this presupposes that she has money to pay for a lawyer and other legal costs. Many mothers also believe that it would be of no use even if they could afford to go to court; the father wouldn't pay anyway since he wouldn't really have to. It could be argued that it is actually less important how true this assumption is: the fact that the mothers believe it to be true keeps them from trying.<sup>79</sup>

In spite of an often precarious economic situation, only 36% of the Italian mothers say that they have suffered financial emergencies. The remaining interviewees describe a more constant low income level, but without specific crises. Forty-four per cent of the mothers state that they have debts. It seems very important to many of the Italian mothers not to be in debt to anyone. Several are in a situation where they are very dependent upon the "goodwill" of others, but material and non-material help is then given in the form of *gifts*, not loans, or within a wider kinship network of internal exchange where the mother does favours in return for help.

LONE MOTHERS REPORTING FINANCIAL EMERGENCIES

	N	%
Yes	9	36
No	16	64
Total	25	100

LONE MOTHERS WITH DEBTS

	N	%
Yes	11	44
No	14	56
Total	25	100

Debts in the Italian sample were in some cases to family and friends, but mostly in the form of credit loans or quite often debts related to housing (either loans for buying an apartment or lagging behind with the rent). There generally seemed to be a reluctance among the Italian mothers to borrow money from friends or family, even if this kind of assistance was quite common in the form of "help" and "interchange" (i.e. not perceived as "debt").

Seventy-two per cent of the mothers were involved in economic interchange with their family, most commonly more or less continuous help from parents or other relatives to the mother and her children. Economic help from/in between friends existed in 32% of the cases. Normally this kind of economic help was much less comprehensive than the former.

In the Italian sample, children worked in four of the families (16%). It is very interesting to note here that in three of these cases the child's income did not contribute to the family income. In all three cases it was because the mothers explicitly did not want their children to help with common expenses, because they felt that it would have led to *loss of authority* to receive money from the children. In all cases the children were sons of legal age, thus it seems that these mothers use economic control as a means to remain head of the family, even when the son is grown up (over 25 in two cases).

Regarding the ability to raise 1,500,000 lire (775 EURO) within a week in a crisis situation, 68% replied that they thought that they could. The most common ways mentioned were family and relatives or own savings, but some also replied bank loans or friends. Many underlined that it had to be a “real crisis”; they often declined things such as visits to the dentist for themselves.

### Relations to the surrounding society

In the Italian sample, 44% believed that society at large tended to treat lone mothers badly, both regarding legal/social rights and attitudes. Twenty-eight per cent had no opinion, while the remaining 28% believed that lone mothers were well taken care of by Italian society, and that cultural attitudes had changed so that the family form was now less stigmatised than it used to be. An important reason for a perception of lone mothers as an “abnormal” family form was said to be the strong influence of the Catholic Church. Even if the family form is now more accepted than before, many mothers felt that they were expected not to be content with their situation, but that they should try and “solve” it as soon as possible, i.e. find a new man.

Regarding contact with authorities represented by the social services, unemployment office and regional social insurance office, the most telling result is that the majority of mothers had no opinion because they simply had never had any contact with these offices. This is most true for the regional social insurance office: 92% had never been in personal contact with the office and the remaining 8% said that the contact had worked badly. Forty-four and 52% respectively had never been in contact with the social services and the unemployment office. Of those who had been in contact with these authorities, a very large majority felt that the contact had not worked well or said that they had been treated badly. Contact with these welfare state representatives seems hence either non-existent or negative. It was common also among mothers who had not been in contact with the authorities in question to have very strong, negative opinions of them; they seemed generally to be perceived as opponents rather than helpers. In several interviews I was told that social services could very easily take children away from lone mothers. This opinion seemed quite firmly founded regardless of educational level, and for various reasons a couple of mothers had had to live without their children for a period. Again, even if this conception is unfounded, it still stops women who might be entitled to help from contacting the social services, or from insisting on their rights when they are in contact with them. Overall, a very great scepticism and pessimism seemed to prevail regarding these authorities’ potential, or even willingness, to help, and even more regarding the mothers’ own possibilities to exercise any social rights.<sup>80</sup>

### The personal networks

*“I don’t pay any money for my family’s help. But I pay in other ways. You always pay in some way.”*

The absolute majority (88%) of the Italian mothers spend most of their social time with their families, the own family and/or the family of origin. Sixteen per cent have social contacts with their neighbours, who are then normally within a tight circle of friends and not mere “social neighbourhood contacts”. A full third of

the mothers have social contacts with co-workers. Sixty-eight per cent said they had someone to confide in, usually friends or family or origin. A full third replied no to that question.

Regarding help with money or practical favours, the majority turn to their family of origin. For good advice, 36% would turn to their family while another 36% would turn to friends. Forty per cent say they ask no one for advice. Regarding company and support, almost half (48%) prefer friends to family (20%), and as many as 44% say that they have nobody to turn to but are mostly alone apart from the children.

In the interviews it emerges that the possibilities to apply for social assistance in Torino are based on the idea that help should primarily be supplied by the family of origin. Several mothers in the Italian sample related that they had been denied help because they were seen to have a family to turn to. Many therefore turn to the family of origin out of necessity and in many cases it works very well, but even when it does the mothers still feel that they “pay” for the help through interference in their private life and limited autonomy, which is regarded as very strenuous. Help from the family of origin ranges from occasional aid to more regular everyday help that the lone-parent family could not survive without. Very often the help is financial, in the form of loans or gifts of money when the mother does not have any left. In some cases this help is indispensable; the mother is economically dependent upon her parents. A couple of mothers have been forced to move back to their parents with their children, because they have not been able to get a job nor an apartment in a *casa popolare*. As we have seen, the interviewees are also often dependent upon help because of time constraints. Sixty per cent of the mothers in the study are involved in a regular and extensive interchange with their family of origin. Another 20% have good relations, but are not involved in interchange regarding money and services on a regular basis, and the remaining 20% have no relation at all with their family of origin. For this last group, the encounter with the social services naturally becomes especially difficult; they have no (or very bad) contact with their family of origin, but the system presupposes that they turn to them for help. The Italian mothers too are thus a heterogeneous group, regarding for example education, work and ways and possibilities to resolve the time/money equation.

It should be noted again that the Swedish and Italian mothers participating in this project belong to a specific socio-economic group living in urban peripheral areas. Apart from the general income information given in this report, it is also very relevant to take so-called “non-monetary indicators of poverty” into consideration. Overall, Swedish mothers had a better standard of housing than did Italian mothers. This quite obviously had to do with the general rights regarding living standard that exist in Sweden, where housing companies are responsible for providing a minimum standard established by law. Very few mothers owned a car, and those who did had to make do with very old and run-down vehicles. Almost no Swedish mothers owned a washing machine, while all Italian mothers did. This result is also hardly surprising, because of the Swedish mothers possibility to wash in the common laundry rooms. Very few mothers in the whole project owned a dishwasher, a microwave or a computer, while almost all had televisions and telephones. Both in Sweden and Italy, the mothers who could not afford a stable contract with a phone com-

pany had a mobile phone instead. This was more common in Italy, where mobile phone calls cost much less than they do in Sweden.

Other indicators of the material situation were related to clothing and household utensils. Many mothers rarely or never bought new clothes for themselves, even if they managed to buy them for their children. The same was true for utensils, things were normally bought when it was absolutely necessary rather than “for pleasure”. Leisure activities were rare among the mothers in the project, not only for economic reasons, but also because of lack of time. However, the mothers tried to make sure that the children were involved in some kind of activity or hobby if possible. In the interviews, the mothers repeatedly mentioned that they felt helpless when they were not able to pay for activities that the children wanted to participate in. Vacations were uncommon. Almost no mothers could afford to go abroad, and they also did not normally have access to a second home in the country or at the seaside. Regarding health, lastly, many mothers testified that they often declined visits to the dentist or doctor for themselves. The above-mentioned conditions naturally exist to a greater or lesser extent in different families; not all mothers are badly off and some even fare very well. The overall profile of the hundred lone-mother families in the project is however a situation of economic precariousness.

## **10. Making ends meet in a European local context**

### Lone mothers’ subsistence strategies in areas of Göteborg and Torino

Several studies have underlined the increased poverty risks lone mothers face compared to two-parent families. As demonstrated above, many of the mothers in the present study have lived or live in a quite precarious economic situation. Others have managed quite well, both economically and socially. The situation of lone mothers is naturally greatly influenced by the women’s situation prior to becoming a lone parent. A person with a good job, for example, does not necessarily lose it because her family situation has changed and can probably continue to have comparatively sound finances. How the mothers choose to face the basic money/time equation can differ greatly, depending upon personal choice and individual life story and situation, but also on different socio-economic and cultural structures in the two project countries. The interviews clearly show that mothers are indeed largely dependent upon these macro structures, as well as upon the structure of the local neighbourhood, local norms and personal networks.

In both countries lone mothers can be said to be surrounded by a work ethic. Able-bodied persons should primarily work and earn their own living. The Swedish labour market is organised in a way that facilitates the combination of work and family life. Part-time employment is relatively common (even though most lone mothers who work do so full-time), mothers have the right to a comparatively generous maternity leave as well as the right to stay home to take care of sick children. Social services such as well-developed public day-care and benefits such as child allowance, housing allowance and maintenance allowance helps lone mothers (as well as other parents) reconcile work and family life. In Italy, lone moth-

ers also tend to work full-time, which is necessary financially, and even though for instance parental leave and the right to stay home with sick children exist here as well, the rights are less self-evident in practice and less comprehensive. Normally, therefore, the extended family steps in to help with the children. In both countries, however, for many lone mothers a full-time job is a goal that they are not presently able to attain, also due to factors beyond the lone motherhood status, such as education, ethnic origins, social class and local circumstances. The economic role of the welfare state and the family respectively increases in those cases where mothers work less or not at all, and this strongly influences how mothers form their subsistence strategies.

As has been discussed throughout the report, a person's possibility to exercise his or her social rights (understood here mainly as the right to services and benefits based on citizenship) varies depending on social class, civil status, and place of residence. The mothers participating in the project belong mainly to the same socio-economic strata (working class/lower middle class), they are lone parents and they live in suburban areas. The structural frameworks these conditions imply influence the mothers' possibilities and choices. At the same time, the group is heterogeneous, not only with regard to age, ethnicity, education and connection to the labour market, but also regarding how the interviewees themselves perceive and deal with their situation and everyday life.

### We are a family? How the mothers perceive lone parenthood

The perception of the one-parent family can vary from very positive to very negative not only in society at large, but also among lone parents themselves. Some mothers very firmly state that the one-parent situation is definitely the best alternative at the present stage of their family career, it is a situation they have freely chosen and prefer to any present (and often future) alternative. At the other end of the spectrum we find women who see the one-parent family situation as a defective family lacking an essential element: a husband and father. A family is not a "real" family without a man, and the best way to get out of a negative situation would be to remarry. Between these two extremes there are naturally many women who feel that while living as lone mother is not their family ideal, it is the best alternative at present. Kari Moxnes has named these three family types "A better family for us", "Not ideal - but all I have" and "Not a real family, just an intermediate stage".<sup>81</sup> The mothers' conception of their own family situation is based on factors such as whether or not the situation as lone mother is the woman's own choice, how much time has passed after separation or divorce but also, and not least, what resources the mothers have.

The way lone parents interpret and confront their situation has been analysed in terms of "coping strategies". Examples of such strategies are the: *creative strategy*, which means actively implementing changes in the present situation; *adjustive strategy* – accepting the present life situation, no new solutions; *repressive strategy*, unwillingness to reflect on one's situation; *denying strategy* to avoid difficulties by denying the problems and *giving-up strategy*, to become helpless and passively wait for others to help.<sup>82</sup> As we can see, the spectrum here stretches from active choices on the mother's part to a passive attitude regarding possibilities to change or influence one's own life situation.

The absolute majority of the mothers participating in the present project place themselves under the alternatives *A better family for us* and *Not ideal - but all I have*. The pattern is the same in Sweden and Italy. This is reflected also in terms of coping strategies, where *creative* or *adjustive* seem to be the more common alternatives. My research has not focused on this issue, but a definite imbalance towards the positive and active end of the spectrum regarding interpretation of the own situation as well as choice of strategies is very clear in the interviews. One impression is that many mothers simply do not have the "luxury" of choosing a passive alternative; they have to deal with the family situation on a daily basis. This probably, at least partly, depends upon my focus on economic and material aspects. The whole range of alternatives is, however, represented in the sample. Many women hope to "overcome" the present family situation that they did not want or actively choose, and a few also describe themselves and their situation more negatively in terms of victimisation. Not surprisingly, the interpretation of the own situation (as positive or negative family form) directly influences the strategies chosen, where the positive mothers are the most active and creative and negative mothers tend to be more passive. In both countries, and more pronounced in Italy, it is common for the mothers to feel that the fathers of their children do not help enough. Most commonly, however, negative interpretations of present economic and material situation as well as future possibilities are referred to the surrounding welfare system and the labour market. The "problem" is hence not primarily the lack of a man in the family, but rather obstacles that society at large poses for people who do not adhere to the nuclear family norm. Mothers who interpret their situation positively tend to feel also that they are not so badly treated by society at large. Often, however, there is a discrepancy between the mothers' own understanding and the way they feel that others (extended family, welfare institutions, labour market) see and treat them.

### In the eyes of the beholder. How society at large looks upon lone parenthood

Economically and socially, lone parents are a comparatively vulnerable group. In most cases, it is this vulnerability, rather than the status of lone parenthood in itself, that is perceived as the "problem" by the lone mothers. Life as a lone parent is quite often the result of an active choice and the interviewees on the whole are content with this life and family form. At the same time, mothers are also affected by how society at large sees and treats them. Judgements from the surrounding world interact with and influence the mother's own interpretation of her situation. This has been discussed in research regarding new family forms in late modernity, where public discourses surrounding lone mothers have been discerned and problematised.

One discourse sees lone mothers as a *social threat*. According to this discourse, lone mothers not only constitute a threat to the right family form – the nuclear family – but they also tend to be a threat to the work ethic since they are lazy and prefer to live on benefits.

Another discourse sees lone mothers as a *social problem*. The difference from the first discourse is that the woman here is perceived as a victim of circumstances (for instance the presupposition is that lone mothers *want* to work, but that they are discriminated against in the labour market).

A third discourse regarding lone mothers is about *lifestyle change*. If the first two discourses describe mothers mainly in negative terms (as actively anti-social or as passive victims), discourse three is about far-reaching changes in family patterns and gender relations. These changes are a result of individuals' active choices regarding their own lives, within a context of overarching economic, social and cultural changes in a post-industrial age.

The fourth discourse looks at the phenomenon from a feminist perspective: lone mothers as *women who escape patriarchy*.<sup>83</sup>

It is reasonable to imagine that "reality" is composed of a combination of the above discourses. How society perceives lone motherhood is very important, since these discourses interact with and influence actual policies. In Sweden, the way family policies are formed indicates a focus on the third discourse, i.e. lone motherhood as one of several family forms in late modernity and (in the ideal case) not a relevant factor in the woman's relationship with the labour market and welfare system. It has been argued, however, that since lone mothers' comparative social and economic exposure has increased in recent years, we might be witnessing a resurgence of the second discourse of lone mothers as a social problem.<sup>84</sup>

The Italian results in the present research indicate a tendency towards the second discourse. It is perceived as a problem if nuclear families break up, and the lone-mother family was often primarily seen as a socially and economically vulnerable "problem" group by the local welfare representatives I have spoken to. On a more general level, however, and as discussed above, lone mothers in both Italy and Sweden are still primarily an invisible subject and hence not surrounded by any specific discourse in a national debate.

The "social threat" discourse predominant in the American and British debates does not seem to be as widely dispersed in the Swedish and Italian context (even if the Italian mothers seemed to experience more stigmatisation). The only occasions on which I heard explanations that would fall under the fourth discourse of "women escaping patriarchy" were during conversations with the lone mothers themselves. Some interviewees liked to interpret their family choice in that way, and were quite proud of not being "dependent upon" any man.

### The significance of the local context

The importance of the local context has been underlined throughout this report. Also when it comes to norms and values, the local neighbourhood is a significant level. As Duncan & Edwards (1996) point out, social ties and relationships can be resources not only materially, through e.g. child support, but also as "systems of beliefs or moralities and shared social identities".<sup>85</sup> They argue that socially recreated moral beliefs at the neighbourhood level regarding motherhood, for example regarding whether mothers should work outside the home or not, may influence mothers' ideas about how "good" mothers should behave and their decisions about whether or not to take up paid work. Duncan & Edwards term these understandings about the identity and responsibilities of mothers *gendered moral rationalities*, the main point being that lone parents (as other individuals) do not base their decisions only on "rational" economic or

practical factors, but also to a certain degree on cultural and social conceptions about, in this case, motherhood. To adhere to local cultural and social norms is part of a complex rationality that goes beyond the often simplified choices of the ideal type “rational economic man”.

As we have seen in the presentation of results above, the Italian mothers in the present project were not in any way engaged in their own neighbourhoods; in fact it was quite common not even to know one's neighbours. It might be reasonable to argue, therefore, that rather than neighbourhood norms and values, in their case it is primarily the norms and values of those close to them, i.e. the extended family and friends, that influence their actions. Many mothers recounted that they depended on these persons' opinions on, for example, child rearing, or whether or not a lone mother should be seeing men or be involved in wage labour. This “interference” in private life was a price that had to be paid for the continuous help and support these persons provide. Italian mothers who received help from voluntary organisations, for instance the Church, found that this help too was generally accompanied by “good advice” about “correct behaviour”. Naturally, there were also mothers in the project who were quite content with their family relations, and who felt that the interchange functioned well and without undue pressures or interference.

In the Swedish project areas, neighbourhood networks are relatively common. Also when contact between neighbours has not developed into proper networks, people still tend to know their neighbours to some extent since the physical design and organisation of the project areas means that people regularly meet each other, for instance in the laundry room. For those involved in networks on a more organised basis, local norms and values probably play quite an important role. If a mother diverges from local norms too much, she may risk being excluded from networks, which influences her access to child care, for instance. The cost of being excluded from networks can be high for persons who do not have alternative “safety nets”. We have seen above that sometimes the networks were indeed significant to mothers, some women even cooked together. A couple of these mothers also mentioned the negative sides of the close co-operation in the form of gossip and interference in private affairs. Non-family networks too have a controlling aspect, which might condition whether and what kind of help members of the networks receive. Swedish mothers were also involved in various degrees of interchange with their family of origin, even if normally much less comprehensive and regular than for the Italian mothers. There are thus positive and negative aspects to consider regarding both family and non-family networks.

The influence of the local context on material and economic conditions must lastly be emphasised once again. Comparing the Göteborg and Torino mothers, it seems clear that beyond cultural values and traditions, the physical and social formation of the local neighbourhood, the local welfare system and labour market are very relevant for the choice of strategies. Economic and practical conditions interact with cultural values and norms on different levels, influencing mothers' subsistence choices. The complex interrelationships between different factors are in constant flux and change over time, which means that mothers continuously must re-evaluate and adjust their strategies. It is useful to remember therefore that the results in the present report are to a high extent time- and context-bound.



## Subsistence strategies

Strategies of subsistence are worked out in the intersection between the labour market, welfare systems and personal networks. We have seen above that the absolute majority of the project mothers in Sweden and Italy take an active approach to their situation. This is especially true regarding subsistence strategies, where a wide range of decisions is taken on a daily basis. Income possibilities are re-evaluated regularly, and spending in particular is an issue that has to be dealt with on a day-to-day basis, for instance when deciding what to have for dinner or whether or not someone in the family should buy new clothes. Again, it seems rather difficult for the women *not* to take an active approach regarding daily subsistence. Regardless of whether the woman has emotionally resolved the separation from an ex-partner or accepted the new family form, she still has to put food on the table at the end of the day. The distinction that can be made here is rather between *short-term* and *long-term* strategies. Necessity forces mothers to deal with short-term subsistence issues on a daily basis. But long-term planning in the form of further education, applying for a new job, trying to find a new apartment or some other change that might improve the family's situation in the long run is less evident among all the women in the study. Many seem to have given up and to believe there is no use in trying to change overarching conditions; the best one can do is to face problems as they come along within given conditions that one cannot change.

In the present study, women have varying experiences of and connection to the formal labour market in the two countries. The Swedish mothers are unemployed or work part-time to a much higher degree than their Italian counterparts. The “chicken and egg” question here is whether they can “choose” to work less or not at all because they have a well-developed social safety net to turn to. A definite result from the interviews in this project is that mothers prefer to work if only they can, and preferably full-time (for economic reasons; most would prefer part-time in order to be able to spend more time with their children). Wage labour results in a better financial situation than benefits, and especially so after the changes that have been implemented in the Swedish system of services and benefits during the 1990s. The Italian mothers in the study work full-time when they work. Those who do not work, however, will probably find it very difficult, if not impossible, to enter the formal labour market. This prolongs dependence upon the family of origin, which might strain relations in the long run. In the Italian sample too, mothers definitely preferred to work and earn their own living.<sup>86</sup>

Wage labour and welfare benefits hence constitute the largest segment of Swedish mothers' income packages, while Italian mothers primarily combine wage labour with help from the extended family. Since half of the “problem” lone mothers face is not directly financial but has to do with time, the access to services also becomes imperative. Swedish mothers primarily turn to the services offered by the welfare system, while Italian mothers have to rely more on personal networks. These findings are in line with previous research (see note 40), so the local patterns in the present project can be said to correspond to national patterns. *The proportion of income* from wage labour, on the one hand, and benefits and family on the

other, probably varies more than does the overall composition of the package. The package also normally has to be complemented in various ways in order to obtain a decent standard of living.

Informal labour is somewhat more common among the Torino mothers, even if informal activities have certainly increased in the Göteborg context as well. That unemployment in Sweden has increased at the same time as there has been cut backs in benefits and services, has led to a situation where people living on the margins have seen themselves forced to complement formal incomes in different ways. This can be done either *selling* informal goods or services (cleaning was a common occupation, one woman was a well-known fortune teller in her neighbourhood and another offered help with dealing with the social services since she had become an expert in rights and regulations) or *buying* them. This was most prevalent in Hjällbo, where “everybody” apparently knew where to buy the cheapest cigarettes or clothes. Or as one woman put it: “I can buy everything I need here in my own yard. I don’t have to use the shop much unless I want to”. In Torino, “local informality” was less apparent. The Italian informality the project mothers talked about had more to do with illegal employment. One open question is of course where to draw the line between informal activities and the exchange of goods and services within personal networks.<sup>87</sup> Again, the Italian mothers were involved in extensive exchange of different kinds with their extended families.

The subsistence strategies that have served as a point of departure in the present project are: a) wage labour in the formal labour market; b) transfers in the form of benefits; c) exchange within the family and with relatives and friends in the form of goods and services, but also in the form of economic transfers, and; d) informal incomes. As we have seen, most mothers combine all of these sources to a greater or lesser extent. When a strategy is not included, for instance wage labour or exchange with family, it is normally because the option does not exist, rather than that the mother specifically chose to exclude it. To combine as many sources of income and help as possible seems to be a logical choice, especially in times of economic precariousness. Even if one does not activate neighbourhood networks on a daily basis, for example, it might be strategic to work on those relations anyway, in order to be able to turn to the network in times of need.

Wage labour is the most important part of lone mothers’ income package. When there is no, or too little, work, incomes have to be complemented. Swedish mothers primarily turn to the welfare system, Italian mothers primarily to the family. In Sweden, the combination of unemployment and welfare retrenchment has led to an increase in the mothers’ dependence on personal networks and informal activities in order to make ends meet. Many mothers report this situation as very stressful. It is one thing to *occasionally* turn to others for help, another to be dependent on that help. In the Swedish case, help from family and friends is complemented by sometimes quite well-developed neighbourhood networks. An increased level of informality allows people not only to buy goods and services more cheaply, but also to sell them to complement incomes. Mothers also talked about local exchange markets, where women met and exchanged children’s clothes and other used items, a new phenomenon in Lärjedalen. Personal networks and informal channels of subsistence hence help substitute for a retrenching welfare system or diminished wage

labour income for mothers in a difficult economic situation. The fact that mothers with a firm position in the labour market fare quite well only confirms the importance of employment. Often, due to the general labour market position of women, secure wage labour too needs to be complemented to make ends meet. Several mothers stated that it was not possible to survive on wages only. To participate in workfare activities or other education was a common strategy to either maintain or establish connections to “the system”.

Italian mothers combine wage labour with family help. Those in the project who have no employment, or family that is well off, indeed find themselves in a very precarious economic situation. As noted above, however, fewer Italian mothers had debts than did Swedish mothers. Also, a much higher percentage of Italian mothers stated that they would be able to raise money in a crisis situation. These mothers hence seem to have access to some kind of “ultimate safety net”, should things get really bad. However, when they are poor, the Italian mothers are much poorer. The strong element of means-testing in the social system means that the mothers found such help quite stigmatising; they had to find themselves in a very vulnerable situation to even consider turning to the social services. Fears about “losing the children” or being subject to some other kind of “punishment” or control were quite widespread. Neighbourhood networks were non-existent among the Torino mothers. On the other hand, voluntary organisations played a much greater role than in Sweden, and some mothers received help from these organisations on a regular basis. In both countries, mothers with a weak connection to the labour market see a larger part of their income packages coming from personal or informal sources of different kinds. This arguably lessens their possibility to maintain an autonomous and independent household.

### Autonomy and dependence

The women in the present project tended to evaluate their relationship with various sources of subsistence – the labour market, welfare system and personal networks - in terms of autonomy and dependence. Swedish and Italian mothers used the same terminology, and the concepts were applied at the level of individual experience. It was seen as preferable to be able to form and maintain the own household independently of the “goodwill” of others, i.e. by *exercising rights* (rather than by being dependent upon “favours”). Economic dependence upon an institution or other person(s) was seen as stigmatising in the sense that it often was connected to, or confused with, moral or psychological dependence. This was true both for the way most of the mothers themselves perceived dependence, and the way they thought others around them saw it. Dependence hence becomes an individual characteristic with negative connotations, and many women felt that in their capacity as lone mothers they were more likely to be subject to moral interpretations of their possible economic dependence than other groups.<sup>88</sup> To be able to make ends meet without entering into relationships of dependence with representatives of the different sources of subsistence mothers used, was hence seen as desirable. Autonomy, or independence, consequently had positive connotations for the mothers (as it tends to in modern society as a whole), referring to positive qualities in the individual also on a moral or psychological register.<sup>89</sup> It is interesting to note that the concepts of autonomy and dependence have also, throughout the era of welfare construction, been used at the insti-

tutional policy level, where autonomy has positive connotations while dependence is seen as something to be avoided. Autonomy is interpreted as the individual freedom from compulsion to enter potentially oppressive relationships, but also – as mentioned above – the possibility to form autonomous households without risking poverty or marginalisation.<sup>90</sup> This stress upon individual autonomy can be seen as contradicting family solidarity. Results from the present study as well as previous research show that people are indeed involved in relationships with family and other personal networks that are based on more “diffuse” functions than sheer financial need. An important aspect of personal relationships that is underlined in this kind of research is the strong element of *reciprocity*.<sup>91</sup>

### Direct and indirect dependence

Feminists have argued that women have moved from being dependent on men to being dependent on the “state”. Even if there is some truth in that observation, following the arguments outlined above, a general impression from the interviews is that the mothers primarily want to avoid *dependence based on personal ties*. In several cases in my samples it might be considered somewhat ironic that interviewees have tended to move from dependence on a man to dependence on the family of origin or other personal networks. I call that kind of relationship *direct dependence* in order to distinguish it from dependence on welfare benefits, which I would call *indirect dependence*. It is true that indirect dependence still requires a certain behaviour on part of the mother in order to fulfil the criterion to qualify for help, but in comparison those demands seem to be interpreted as less intrusive of personal autonomy. Both Swedish and Italian mothers in the present research believe that indirect dependence is preferable to direct because it gives a greater sense of autonomy, and that autonomy is indeed important to them. This opinion is most clearly expressed by the mothers in the project who specifically emphasise that they ask *no one* for help but prefer to manage on their own. These interviewees also tended to speak somewhat negatively about women who did not make it on their own but “agreed to being dependent” upon others.

In the relationship with welfare systems, many mothers feel that they are exercising their *rights as citizens*, whereas in the relationship with extended family (and other personal networks) they are in a certain sense *recipients of favours*. Because of how welfare systems, and especially social services, are organised in Torino, the Italian mothers in the project feel that they are largely recipients of favours also in relation to the welfare state. Rather than exercising rights, many feel that they are dependent upon the goodwill of the specific social worker that they happen to encounter, and that they are expected to “behave correctly” if they want to receive any help. In these cases, the mothers conclude that it is the direct relationship with the social worker rather than more indirect references to social citizenship rights that determine not only whether they receive any benefits but also the amount. When a relationship which “should” be more indirect becomes direct in this way, the mothers feel very uncomfortable.

Swedish mothers’ tendency to organise maintenance with neighbours and friends might be interpreted as a striving for more autonomy. Even if local norms and values influence mothers, they might feel less dependent than they would in relation to the family of origin. It is arguably easier to interrupt contact with a

neighbour than it is with one's mother. The Swedish social system is organised with the aim of securing citizens as much autonomy as possible. It is true that many women described an increasingly strenuous relationship with representatives of the local welfare system in the wake of recent retrenchments. In comparison to the Italian mothers, however, the Swedish mothers' rights and possibilities in relation to the welfare system function very well. Above all, Swedish mothers were much more aware of their rights than were Italian mothers, and could therefore argue their case quite well with the social worker. Also, in the Lärjedalen context it was not considered stigmatising to be a lone mother or to receive social assistance. The Swedish mothers' dependence upon the welfare system is, however, very high. Their economic situation is strongly influenced by whether the system works smoothly or not. As we have seen, one of the main causes of interviewees' economic problems was delayed payments or rule changes. This sensitivity indicates that even though the mother's relation to the welfare system is one of indirect dependence, it is still a very strong dependence.

Italian mothers' dependence upon their family of origin can be seen in a life course perspective. It could be argued that the mother's parents, through helping much with their grandchildren when they are small, are making an "investment" for the future when their daughter is hopefully better off and when they themselves might need help. Just as the care of children is to a large extent the responsibility of families in Italy, so is care of the elderly. The help the lone mother needs when her children are small creates a kind of debt, which the older generation quite probably will "call in" if and when need arises in the future. Reciprocity within relationships that are likely to last over time can hence be interpreted by participants in a long-term perspective.

Full autonomy requires economic independence, a goal which for most women in the study has proven difficult to achieve. This points directly to a fundamental question in welfare research with a gender focus: can women afford a socially acceptable standard of living independently of family relations? For the Italian mothers in the present study, and for an increasing number of the Swedish mothers, the answer to the question is no: it is extremely difficult for women with a weak connection to the labour market to form autonomous households with their children. The general organisation of the labour market which discriminates against women in different ways and affects them relatively severely in times of unemployment remains a major obstacle to equal gender possibilities. It has also been discussed whether participation in the labour market should really be the primary goal for a mother of small children. Maybe care work should be upgraded, so that mothers could stay home with their children instead.<sup>92</sup> This however poses great demands on both the welfare system and the labour market. Not only would the welfare system have to secure mothers an income during the years of care work, but the labour market would have to be flexible enough to allow them to re-enter after several years of absence from work. Otherwise mothers might find that the cost of staying home with small children was indeed very high in the long run.

Lone mothers' possibility to form autonomous households and secure a decent standard of living is ultimately about how best to provide children with a socially, emotionally and economically secure upbringing.

ing. If the focus is shifted from the mother to the child, the conditions of lone-mother families (as well as other families with children) is in the end about the preconditions for reproduction in society as a whole. It might be argued that Sweden has come a long way in leaving the choice of family form to parents, while still securing optimal conditions for children. To mix the income package with incomes from part-time labour (thus securing more time with the children), transfers from the welfare system and, when necessary, interchange with family, friends and neighbours seems to be a solution that many of the lone mothers in the present research would opt for. To provide possibilities for this is a challenge for the labour market and welfare system. The difficult balance between making lone mothers and any specific problems they might face invisible and pointing them out as a specific group makes policy-making difficult. New family forms and obligations also make it problematic in the long run to form policy around a specific type of family unit. We have for instance seen that persons who might not normally be categorised as lone parents firmly perceive and define themselves that way. If these families indeed organise everyday life the way they describe, this naturally has implications for all those involved, particularly the children. Family obligations also often stretch beyond present family formation. It is for instance quite common for women to maintain close contact with the parents of their previous partners, since these people are still the grandparents of the children. How does this influence the children' upbringing or the economic situation of the family? All these immensely complex interrelationships pose great challenges to future family policy, a cornerstone in lone mothers' formation of subsistence strategies.

## Bibliography

- Alanen, L. (1992) *Modern Childhood? Exploring the "child question" in Sociology*, University of Jyväskylä, Institute for Education, Research publication series A 50.
- Bak, M. (1997) *Enemorfamiljen*, Forlaget Sociologi, Copenhagen.
- Bastard, B. & Cardia-Vonèche, L. (1992) "One parent families facing economic problems. A study of fifty households in France" in Björnberg, U. (ed.) *One Parent Families*, SISWO, Amsterdam.
- Bimbi, F. (1997) "Lone Mothers in Italy: a Hidden and Embarrassing Issue in a Familist Welfare Regime" in Lewis, J.: *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes. Shifting Policy Logics*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- Björnberg, U. ed. (1992) *One Parent Families*, SISWO, Amsterdam.
- Björnberg, U. (1997) "Single Mothers in Sweden: Supported Workers Who Mother" in Duncan, S. & Edwards, R. *Single Mothers in an International Context: Mothers or Workers?* Taylor & Francis, London.
- Björnberg, U. ed. (in press) "Sweden. Family Change and Family Policy".
- Björnberg, U. & Gardberg, C. (1997a) "Sweden. Issues Concerning the Family in 1996" in Ditch, J., Barnes, H. and Bradshaw, J. (ed.) *European Observatory on National Family Policies*, University of York.
- Björnberg, U & Gardberg, C. (1997b) *Försörjning och välfärd i förändring. Om ensamstående mödrars lokala strategier*, paper for the 19<sup>th</sup> Nordic Sociology Congress, Copenhagen 13-15/5 1997.
- Botta, M. (1994) *Bostäder i Europa. Italien*, SABO, Eskilstuna.
- Bradshaw et al. (1996) *Policy and Employment of Lone Parents in 20 Countries*, European Observatory on National Family Policies, University of York.
- Caldenby, C. (1998) *De stora programmens tid 1960-1975*, working paper, Centrum för Byggnadskultur, Göteborg.
- Comune di Torino (1998a) *Struttura della popolazione residente nel comune di Torino e circoscrizioni: 1997 e confronti con anni precedenti*, Uff. Sistema Informativo della Divisione V Servizi Socio-assistenziali del Comune di Torino.
- Comune di Torino (1998b) *Materiali informativi sull'assistenza economica del comune di Torino: 1997 e confronti con anni precedenti*, Uff. Sistema Informativo della Divisione V Servizi Socio-assistenziali del Comune di Torino.
- Copes, A. (1992) *Strategies Developed by Female Heads of Household from Low-Income Sectors in Santiago*, working paper, Dept. of Sociology, Lund.
- Duncan, S. & Edwards, R. (1996) "Lone mothers and paid work: neighbourhoods, local labour markets and welfare state regimes" in *Social Politics* 3/3.
- Duncan, S. & Edwards, R. (1997) *Single Mothers in International Contexts: Mothers or Workers?*, Taylor & Francis, London.
- Edin, K. & Lein L. (1997) *Making Ends Meet. How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*, Sage, New York.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton University Press.
- Ferrara, M. (1996) "The Southern Model of Welfare in Social Europe" in *Journal of European Social Policy* 1996:6.

- Garcia, M., Mingione, E., Oberti, M. & Pereirinha, J (1998) "The local context: Trends and Typologies" in *ESOPO – Evaluation of Social Policies at the Local Urban Level: Income Support for the Able Bodied*, Final Report of the ESOPO-project.
- Gardberg, C. (1996) *The Invisible Labour. Women, work and economy in the urban informal sector – a case study from Santiago de Chile*, masters thesis, Dept. of Sociology, Göteborg University.
- Gustafsson, B. (1996) "Fattigdom i Sverige. Förändring åren 1975-1993, struktur och dynamik" in *Den nordiska fattigdomens utveckling och struktur*, Nordiska Ministerrådet.
- Hobson, B. (1994) "Solo Mothers, Social Policy Regimes and the Logics of Gender" in *Gendering Welfare States*, Diane Sainsbury (ed.) SAGE Publications.
- Hobson, B. & Takahashi, M. (1997) "The Parent – Worker Model: Lone Mothers in Sweden" in Lewis, J.: *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes. Shifting Policy Logics*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.
- ISTAT – Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (1991) *13 Censimento Generale della Popolazione e delle Abitazioni. I Grandi Comuni – Torino*.
- Kjeldstad, R. (1998) *Enslige forsørgere: Forsørgelse og levekår før og etter overgang til en ny livsfase*, Statistics Norway, Oslo.
- Kyllönen, R. (1998) *The Social Construction of Lone Mothers. A Case Study of the Welfare Service in Venice*, MZES Working paper I/29, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Mannheim.
- Lassbo, G. (1988) *Mamma – (pappa) – barn. En utvecklingsekologisk studie av socialisation i olika familjetyper*, dissertation, Göteborg Studies in Educational Sciences 68.
- Lassbo, G. (1992) "I'll Get By With a Little Help from My Friends. The Extra- and Intra-familial Relations of the One Parent Family" in Björnberg, U. (ed.) *One Parent Families*, SISWO, Amsterdam.
- Lewis, J. ed. (1993) *Women and Social Policies in Europe. Work, Family and the State*, Aldershot.
- Layder, D. (1993) *New Strategies in Social Research*, Polity Press.
- Moxnes, K. (1992) "One Parent Family Strategies" in Björnberg, U. (ed.) *One Parent Families*, SISWO, Amsterdam.
- Negri, N. & Saraceno, C. (1996) *Le politiche contro la povertà in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Niemelä, P., Myyrä, J. & Lento, R. (1985) "A new approach to marriage – coping strategies after divorce" in Cseh-Szombathy et al. (ed.) *The aftermath of divorce – coping with family change. An investigation in eight countries*. Budapest.
- Olsson, S., Cruse Sondén, G. & Ohlander, M. *Det lilla grannskapet. Gårdar, trapphus och socialt liv*, Centrum för byggnadskultur, Göteborg.
- Orloff, A. (1993) "Gender and the social rights of citizenship: the comparative analysis of gender relations and welfare states", *American Sociological Review* 58:3.
- Ruspini, E. (1998) *Living on the Poverty Line. Lone Mothers in Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Sweden*, MZES Working Paper I/Nr 28, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Mannheim.
- Sainsbury, D. ed. (1994) *Gendering Welfare States*, SAGE Publications.
- Sainsbury, D. (1996) *Gender, Equality and Welfare States*, Cambridge University Press.
- Saraceno, C. (1996) *Politiche di sostegno al costo dei figli in Italia*, paper presented at the International Conference on the Cost of Children, Bologna.
- Saraceno, C. (1998) *Mutamenti della famiglia e politiche sociali in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Saraceno, C. et al. (1998) *ESOPO – Evaluation of social Policies at the Local Urban Level: Income Support for the Able Bodied*, Final Report of the ESOPO-project.



- Sgritta, G. & Zanatta, A. (1997) "Italy in 1996" in Ditch, J., Barnes, H. and Bradshaw, J. (ed.) *European Observatory on National Family Policies*, University of York.
- Socialdepartementet (1996) *Ensamföräldrarna – en utsatt grupp?*, Valfärdsprojektet.
- Socialdepartementet (1996) SOU 1996:151 *Bidrag genom arbete – en antologi*, Storstadskommittén, Stockholm.
- Socialdepartementet (1997) SOU 1997:118 *Delade Städer*, Storstadskommittén, Stockholm.
- Socialdepartementet (1998) SOU 1998:25 *Tre städer. En storstadspolitik för hela landet*. Storstadskommittén, Stockholm.
- Strell, M. (1999) *The Housing Situation of Lone-Mother Families: Austria and Finland in a Cross-National Perspective*, MZES Working Paper 2,1999, Mannheim Centre for European Social Research, Mannheim.
- Sunesson, S. et al. (1998) "The flight from universalism" in *European Journal of Social Work*.
- Syltevik, L. (1996) *Fra relasjonelt til individualisert alenemorskap. En studie av alenemødre som mødre, lønnsarbeidere og klienter i velferdsstaten*, dissertation, Dept. of Sociology, University of Bergen.
- Ufficio di Statistica della Città di Torino (1997) *Notiziario di Statistica 1/97*, Torino.
- Winkler, C. (1996) *The Canary in the Coal Mine: Single Mothers and the Welfare State, the Swedish Experience*, Dept. of Sociology, University of Montana.
- Zanatta, A. (1997) "Le famiglie con un solo genitore" in Barbagli, M. & Saraceno, C.: *Lo stato delle famiglie in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

## Appendix: Methodological considerations

### Selection procedures

Seventy-five Swedish mothers and 25 Italian mothers participated in the research underlying this report. Criteria for selection of interviewees was that they were residents in the local area chosen and lone mothers, understood as living alone with their children. Some mothers turned out not to be the only adult in their households. I decided to include those women on basis of their definition, which I found interesting, as well as the fact that they all have the main responsibility for their children. As far as immigrant mothers are concerned, the selection criterion used was that they had lived in the project country for a minimum of five years, in order to ensure that they spoke the language well enough to be able to participate in a qualitative interview, and also have some knowledge of the context (welfare system, labour market, culture) they are in. The criterion turned out to be relevant only in the Swedish study, since no immigrant mothers participated in the Italian part of the project.

Mothers were selected for the Lärjedalen study in co-operation with the Swedish regional insurance office in Göteborg (*Försäkringskassan i Göteborg*) which provided access to a register of mothers receiving income maintenance living in the Lärjedalen area in December 1996. A letter was sent to all the mothers explaining the aim of the study and asking if they were willing to participate.<sup>93</sup> The end result was a total of 75 mothers who fulfilled the selection criterion and were willing to participate in the project.

In the Italian study I also wrote a letter presenting my study and inviting mothers to participate; I posted this letter at about twenty day-care centres and elementary schools in the project area, Circonscrizione 5. In each case I presented myself and my research to one or more persons responsible for the schools. I also presented my study to the social services, to the parish, organisations and other local actors in the area. The mothers who were interested contacted me, ending up with a total of 25 women.<sup>94</sup> In both countries we are hence dealing with a process of *autoselection*. In both cases, however, the sample turned out to be quite diversified with regard to age, number of children, education and connection to the labour market.

### Methodology

The Swedish project will run for three years over the period 1998-2001. The results included in this report are based on a first round of semi-structured interviews in the summer of 1998 with 75 lone mothers in the Lärjedalen area. In the autumn of 1999 we will return to 15 of these mothers for in-depth interviews with a life history approach. In the Swedish project we hence have the possibility to follow interviewees over time and to go back for complementary information should it be necessary.

The Italian part of the project lasted during my TMR research stay in Torino, October 1998-March. 1999. Since I had only one opportunity to interview the Italian mothers, I added to the semi-structured interview questionnaire *themes* regarding incomes and strategies that we discussed freely. I hence got a somewhat fuller picture of the Italian mothers' situation in one round of interviews, whereas we will be gaining a much

deeper insight into the situation of the Swedish mothers during the remaining phases of that project. Interviews with the mothers in the Swedish project will be complemented by interviews with local welfare state representatives, such as officials from the social services, unemployment office and regional social insurance office. In Torino, this kind of informative interviews was carried out with social workers, persons responsible for implementing workfare programmes in the area as well as school personnel. I also conducted control interviews with three lone mothers living outside the project area. Due to time constraints, it was impossible to follow the much more comprehensive Swedish research profile completely.

Apart from interviews with lone mothers and other actors, statistics, previous research and other relevant information is gathered and analysed on all the “levels” represented in the study, combining the qualitative empirical approach with quantitative findings. This *multi-strategy approach* (Layder 1993), hopefully contributes to a fuller picture than would have been achieved through interviews at the individual level only. The work has also been guided by a *grounded theory* approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Very briefly, this method for qualitative research calls for empirical work, theoretical work and analysis to be carried out in layers, rather than dividing the research into well-defined phases. The interplay between different kinds of work is intended to prevent important or relevant empirical information from being excluded due to overly strict, pre-constructed research hypotheses guiding the work. Even though guided by a well-defined research question, the researcher should be as “open” as possible when entering the field. For instance, questionnaires are open to changes or additions, should the interviews indicate that this would be fruitful, until the material can be considered “saturated” (i.e. no new or unexpected research-relevant aspect emerges in the interviews).<sup>95</sup> The fact that the interviewing techniques are slightly different and that the studies are carried out in two different languages and presented in a third must naturally be taken into consideration.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This report is based on work carried out within the framework of two different projects. The Swedish research was conducted within the project “Subsistence and Welfare in Transition” at the Department of Sociology, Göteborg University. Participants in this project are Professor Ulla Björnberg (supervisor, responsible) and Claudia Gardberg Morner. The project runs over a three and a half year period between 1998 and 2001. Funding has been granted by The Swedish Council for Social Research (project F0123/1998). Between January and September 1998 a first phase of the project was carried through. The Swedish results presented here are based on results from the *first phase* of work and hence not from a project which is concluded. The Italian research has been conducted by Claudia Gardberg Morner within the framework of the Training and Mobility Programme for Young Researchers, funded by the European Commission. The project was carried out in Torino during the period October 1998-March 1999. This report was written immediately after the termination of field work in Italy, and while the Swedish project is still running. It is hence a work in progress and the results are preliminary, based on an early stage of analysis. Further publications from both projects are planned. In both countries a very similar research design has been used. This design is based on the project application to The Swedish Council for Social Research, which was worked out jointly by Ulla Björnberg and Claudia Gardberg Morner.
- <sup>2</sup> E.g. Gustafsson (1996) for Sweden and Saraceno (1998) for Italy.
- <sup>3</sup> Socialdepartementet (1996).
- <sup>4</sup> Hobson (1994).
- <sup>5</sup> Selection procedures and methodology applied in the project are described in more detail in the Appendix.
- <sup>6</sup> A *multi-strategy approach*, which basically means a combination of different sources and types of information (Layder 1993).
- <sup>7</sup> Strauss & Corbin (1990); see Appendix.
- <sup>8</sup> Apart from these main interviewees, informative/control interviews were conducted in the Italian study with mothers living in other local areas than the project area (3), as well as with persons working in the project area; social assistants, school personnel and persons working with the implementation of workfare policies (*cantieri di lavoro*). This kind of interviews will be conducted also in the Swedish project at a later stage (please see Appendix).
- <sup>9</sup> I personally interviewed 60 of the mothers in the first phase of the Swedish project. The remaining 15 mothers were interviewed by Åsa Björnberg and Ulla Björnberg.
- <sup>10</sup> The path to lone motherhood influences the economic situation of the lone-parent family. For instance widows are, in European comparison, normally treated more favourably than the other categories, since they can rely on some kind of survivors’ pension. The discussion of “deserving” or “undeserving” aid recipients is also present in some contexts. The widow has become a lone parent through “no fault of her own”, while a woman who has never lived with the father of her child can be considered less deserving (e.g. Lewis, 1993).
- <sup>11</sup> Sgritta & Zanatta (1997).
- <sup>12</sup> E.g. Kjeldstad (1998).
- <sup>13</sup> Björnberg (ed., 1992); Lassbo (1988); Alanen (1992); Bak (1997).
- <sup>14</sup> E.g. Bak (1997); Bastard & Cardia-Vonèche (1992); Copes (1992); Moxnes (1992).

- <sup>15</sup> In the work that has been conducted thus far and in the present report, focus is on *incomes*. Consumption and spending, the possible discrepancy between incomes and expenses and how the mothers go about “filling the gaps”, will be studied in depth in the second phase of the Swedish project.
- <sup>16</sup> Björnberg and Gardberg (1996). Point d), informal incomes, has been formulated as an empirical question in the Swedish project, where informal activities (beyond interchange with family and kin) to date have been comparatively uncommon, partly due to a strict legal framework but also due to a moral code condemning “unclear” activities.
- <sup>17</sup> Esping-Andersen’s (1990) often-quoted division of European welfare states into three distinct regime types, as well as the substantial discussion and critique thereof, will not be repeated here. I do however find the typologies and ideal types quite useful for the purpose of presenting, albeit in a superficial manner, the main characteristics of welfare states at a national level. Of interest to this report might be that I agree with the critique by Ferrera (1996) and others, who argue that Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) have to be viewed separately from the “continental regime type”, in which Esping-Andersen groups them together with countries such as Germany and France. The important feminist critique regarding the gender blindness of earlier welfare state discussions has served as a source of inspiration for the overall project (Björnberg & Gardberg, 1997).
- <sup>18</sup> Esping-Andersen (1990).
- <sup>19</sup> Björnberg (1998).
- <sup>20</sup> Esping-Andersen (1990), Bimbi (1997).
- <sup>21</sup> Saraceno (1998).
- <sup>22</sup> Saraceno (1998).
- <sup>23</sup> Negri & Saraceno (1996). Italy is the only country in the European Union which does not have a “minimum vitale”.
- <sup>24</sup> This is true for most countries, including Sweden, but the outcome of variables is more obvious in Italy.
- <sup>25</sup> Saraceno (1998).
- <sup>26</sup> Bimbi (1997).
- <sup>27</sup> Björnberg (in press).
- <sup>28</sup> E.g. Björnberg & Gardberg (1997a).
- <sup>29</sup> Björnberg & Gardberg (1997 b), Negri & Saraceno (1996).
- <sup>30</sup> The right to form one’s own household has been identified as an important dimension of social citizenship (Orloff, 1993). However, as Monika Strell (1999, p.2) points out, it is important to look not only at the right to form an independent household, but also at the de facto chance or ability to do so.
- <sup>31</sup> Caldenby (1998).
- <sup>32</sup> Socialstyrelsen (1997 and 1998).
- <sup>33</sup> Botta (1994).
- <sup>34</sup> Botta (1994).
- <sup>35</sup> Bradshaw et al. (1996), Hobson (1994), Duncan & Edwards (1997), Syltevik (1996).
- <sup>36</sup> Sainsbury (1996), Duncan and Edwards (1997).

<sup>37</sup> Björnberg (1996).

<sup>38</sup> Hobson & Takahashi (1997) p. 121; see also Björnberg (1997).

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Bimbi (1997).

<sup>40</sup> Zanatta (1997).

<sup>41</sup> Hobson & Takahashi (1997); Bimbi (1997).

<sup>42</sup> Björnberg (1997).

<sup>43</sup> Bimbi (1997). Married mothers might not be regarded primarily as workers in the same way, but in the absence of a male breadwinner, able-bodied women are indeed expected to support their family through wage labour.

<sup>44</sup> Björnberg (1997). It should be pointed out, however, that in both project countries in the present research, lone mothers face a comparatively low risk of economic deprivation, compared to e.g. the UK, though for different reasons. In Sweden the lower risk depends on the fact that family policies allow the combination of care tasks and participation in the labour force, while in Italy the risk is lowered by the strong sheltering capacity of family and kin (see Ruspini 1998 on lone mothers' poverty risks in European perspective).

<sup>45</sup> Björnberg & Gardberg (1997a).

<sup>46</sup> Sunesson et al. (1998).

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Niemeleä et al. (1985); Moxnes (1992); Bak (1997).

<sup>48</sup> E.g. Duncan & Edwards (1997), Lassbo (1992) on the importance of local neighbourhood and personal networks for lone mothers.

<sup>49</sup> Duncan & Edwards (1997) p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Olsson et al (1998).

<sup>51</sup> Neighbourhood personalities are defined as "persons who are known by others in the neighbourhood and who are often referred to. These persons are often visible in the neighbourhood, know much about the local situation and contribute to the common" (Olsson et al p. 187, my translation).

<sup>52</sup> For reasons of space, a detailed description of the mothers' small neighbourhoods is not possible here. I do however believe it to be an important level in understanding how people arrange their daily life, and that it can be a very fruitful category in qualitative studies with this aim. Similar studies seldom distinguish between the small and the larger neighbourhood, but rather refer more generally to "the neighbourhood" (this might be especially true for housing research, see Olsson et al.). The small neighbourhood level is believed to be of importance in the present work, especially in the second phase of the Swedish project, when mothers' networks will be more thoroughly mapped out.

<sup>53</sup> This section is mainly based upon Garcia et al. (1998).

<sup>54</sup> The proportion of immigrants in the two cities is very different: about 11% in Göteborg and approximately 1.7% in Torino. These are official numbers, but even if the actual amount of foreign citizens is higher in Torino, it is still far from the Göteborg level (Garcia et al., 1998)

<sup>55</sup> Socialdepartementet (1998).

<sup>56</sup> Socialdepartementet (1998).

<sup>57</sup> Garcia et al.(1998).

<sup>58</sup> Garcia et al. (1998).

<sup>59</sup> Garcia et al. (1998).

<sup>60</sup> *Lärjedalen* in Göteborg includes the areas 1) Hammarkullen, 2) Hjällbo and 3) Eriksbo. *Circonscrizione 5* in Torino includes the areas 1) Vallette, 2) Lucento, 3) Madonna di Campagna and 4) Borgo Vittoria.

<sup>61</sup> In the presentation of results in Chapters 6-8 I use percentages to give an overview of the mothers' situation and opinions on different parameters. It should be remembered while reading the text that the study is qualitative in character, and also that there are three times as many Swedish mothers in the study as Italian ones. Tables and percentages are used to simplify an overview of the material and not to generalise results. This said, I believe that results from qualitative studies too can generate knowledge and understanding that is valid beyond the specific project sample.

<sup>62</sup> The small neighbourhood does not necessarily correspond to a well-defined physical area; sections of larger yards, or single houses in larger estates, may also constitute a small neighbourhood.

<sup>63</sup> Comune di Torino (1998a).

<sup>64</sup> Comune di Torino (1998a).

<sup>65</sup> Comune di Torino (1998a).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that Göteborg holds a much higher total proportion of immigrants than does Torino, and that in Göteborg, they are concentrated in suburban areas, i.e. also in the project areas, as reflected in the number of immigrant mothers participating in the Swedish study. Even if the proportion of foreign immigrants is not large in the Italian project areas, however, *the proportion of persons originally from the south of Italy is quite large*. Several of those participating in the project hence still have a migratory experience, even if not from another country.

<sup>67</sup> Saraceno et al (1998), ESOPO-report.

<sup>68</sup> ISTAT (1991).

<sup>69</sup> Saraceno et al (1998) ESOPO- report.

<sup>70</sup> ISTAT (1991).

<sup>71</sup> Comune di Torino (1998b).

<sup>72</sup> This classification is somewhat rough, but sufficient for the purposes of the study (the division originates in the Swedish SEI-code, a classification system for occupations).The question was asked in a way that covers present occupation for those employed at the time of the interview, while those who are presently not in employment were asked to state their last occupation. The total is therefore higher than 41 (those employed at the time of the interview).

<sup>73</sup> Normally around 30%. Almost all mothers receive income maintenance and child allowance (approximately 2000 SEK) and many also receive housing allowance. The 30% should hence be drawn at least at 2000 SEK below the stated income

<sup>74</sup> Swedish young people traditionally lived in the parental home until their early twenties (or late teens), made possible by an expansive labour market, a generous welfare system and a specific housing policy. Changes in later

years have made this pattern more difficult to maintain and have in a sense prolonged the parents' maintenance responsibilities. The mothers in the project confirmed this new "climate". Actual effects of this change in attitude have however still to be proven.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. Winkler (1997), Duncan & Edwards (1997), Edin & Lein (1997).

<sup>76</sup> *Cantieri di lavoro* is a workfare programme which normally lasts a year and pays approx. 1,500,000 lira or 775 Euro per month. It was very popular because of the length of the activity and the possibility to stay connected to the "system" afterwards, but it was said to be very difficult to get a place in these programmes.

<sup>77</sup> Determining incomes before tax turned out to be a bit difficult in Italy where interviewees were used to calculating income after tax. The tax scale also varies, so those paying tax pay different levels. Those who were not gainfully employed at the time of the interview did not pay tax, nor did some of the working mothers, since their employment was informal. The mothers in the Italian sample can hence generally be assumed to keep more of the amount stated than the Swedish mothers in the project.

<sup>78</sup> Persons applying for workfare, social assistance or an apartment in public housing are given points according to economic and social situation, which is judged on the basis of different criteria. The needier the applicant is considered to be, the fewer points they are given. Distribution of workfare, etc. starts from the bottom up, which means that applicants with fewer points have priority.

<sup>79</sup> The number of fathers who did not provide any child support might be unusually high in the present project sample. The state however does not enforce or advance child support, and previous research has shown that many fathers do not pay for their children (Saraceno 1996).

<sup>80</sup> See e.g. Kyllönen (1998) on social workers in the Veneto region (who feel that they are sometimes perceived as "thieves of children" in their relationship with lone mothers).

<sup>81</sup> Moxnes (1992).

<sup>82</sup> Niemelä et al (1985).

<sup>83</sup> Duncan & Edwards (1996).

<sup>84</sup> Björnberg (1997).

<sup>85</sup> Duncan & Edwards (1996), p. 204.

<sup>86</sup> Since access to many welfare benefits (such as unemployment insurance or sickness insurance) requires employment in both Sweden and Italy, a comprehensive strategy is to try and gain access to the welfare system via employment in order to cover possible problems in the future. Sweden does have a minimum guarantee level for many allowances (e.g. parental insurance) but the level of the benefit is so low that it has to be complemented with social assistance. For the employed, benefits of this type are normally given at 75% or 80% of former income.

<sup>87</sup> Gardberg (1996).

<sup>88</sup> See Fraser & Gordon (1994) on the concept of dependency.

<sup>89</sup> See Kyllönen (1998).

<sup>90</sup> Hobson (1994), Orloff (1993).

<sup>91</sup> See e.g. Finch (1989) on family obligations and interchange.



<sup>92</sup> E.g. discussion in Duncan & Edwards (1997).

<sup>93</sup> Since information on a person receiving benefit is classified in Sweden, the letters were sent out by the regional insurance office, who also included their own letter presenting the study and our co-operation. While the request letter was sent out by the regional insurance office, the mothers sent their responses directly to us at the Department of Sociology. The regional insurance office is hence in no way informed about which mothers replied, and we have no knowledge of addresses or other information on the mothers who chose not to reply.

<sup>94</sup> It was in many ways time-consuming and difficult to find mothers for the Italian study, due more to bureaucratic difficulties than to unwillingness on the part of the mothers. I needed an official permit to be able to post my letter at the school entrances, and it took several weeks and visits to responsible authorities as well as a formal request from the university to obtain it. The same was true for the social workers participating in my study: for them to be able to help me, official requests had to be sent to different bureaucratic agencies and discussed in meetings, etc., which took quite some time. Some mothers were contacted through an intermediary person such as a teacher or social worker, while others contacted me directly on their own initiative having read the letter. Once I got to the mothers themselves, they were generally very happy to participate and the interviews went well.

<sup>95</sup> Strauss & Corbin, 1990: "data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge" (p. 23). "During the process of research one increases understanding and knowledge, a development that might create new questions, or rather makes more vital questions visible; data are reinterpreted" (p. 43). "Though it is logical that one has a theoretical background before entering the field, it is just as feasible to study relevant theories after having collected data" (pp. 49-50).