



## CHAPTER 4

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# Re-negotiating Single Motherhood Within the Helsinki Mother and Child Home in Post-War Finland

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### INTRODUCTION

The problem of the single mother and her child still requires the serious and compassionate attention of all socially awakened people. The news about how some young, “brutal” mother took the life of her newborn baby, hid the body, and only after being strongly pressured to answer confessed her crime is still repeated too often in the columns of our newspapers. It seems horrible to think that in the midst of all our welfare systems and institutions, a young human being had to fight her desperate battle so alone and without any outside support and end it in such a fatal way.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of unmarried mothers and their “illegitimate” children was a heated topic in the first half of the twentieth century and remained as such

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<sup>1</sup> Martta Salmela-Järvinen, Yksinäisen äidin ongelmia. *Huoltaja*, 11 September 1952, 432.

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in post-war Finland. Working-class women sought actively to solve the problems of single mothers. In the quote above from *Huoltaja*, a professional magazine for the social sector, a working-class female politician justified the need to reduce the social and material hardship of “lone mothers”: In the worst-case scenario, the prevalent stigma could lead to desperate actions. From the upper- and middle-class perspective, single parenthood—especially single motherhood—was connected to an immoral, obscene lifestyle, and the intersection of gender and class was evident in that framing.

Medical, demographic, and political experts defined single mothers as a threat to child welfare, morality, and the nuclear family. In the post-war era, concerns about the declining birth rate and the quality of the population were emphasized. Due to this, population policies were realized as a mixture of pronatalist views (for the health of the nation) and the Swedish family policies outlined by Alva and Gunnar Myrdal (for the health of the family). Since infant mortality was higher in Finland during the 1940s compared to the other Nordic countries, child welfare was the main problem to be solved through maternity care. Nascent welfare policies were put into laws that mandated municipal midwives, postnatal clinics, and district nurses in 1944. These welfare policy steps were organized mainly for nuclear families, and they represented the continuity of interwar bourgeois social policy.<sup>2</sup> Citizens had varying access to health services depending on their status, and in the history of the welfare state certain groups had been neglected or stigmatized.<sup>3</sup> Single women with a low income were one such stigmatized group who were left on the margins of family legislation. Women with limited means had only a few options to support themselves and their children. They were entitled to maternity allowance (1938) and child benefit (1948),<sup>4</sup> but these benefits were not necessarily sufficient to cover monthly expenses. The remaining options were to give up their children for adoption or foster care, or else to resort to municipal poor relief. As a solution, working-class women established *Helsingin Ensikoti* (the Helsinki Mother and Child Home, henceforth Home) in 1942 for “lone” mothers expecting a child.

<sup>2</sup> Bergenheim, *Yhteiskunnan, kansakunnan ja kansan asialla*, 46–7, 291; Harjula, *Terveysten jäljillä*, 59–60. On Swedish family policies, see also Ohlander, *The Invisible Child?*

<sup>3</sup> Harjula, *Health Citizenship*, 573–4.

<sup>4</sup> See Minna Harjula’s chapter, *Encountering Benefits for Families*, in this book.

In this chapter, I study encounters between the Home and single mothers in post-war Finland—a time period when single motherhood was connected to shame and immorality but contraceptive guidance was reserved for married couples and abortion was illegal.<sup>5</sup> I am especially interested in the *process of becoming* a resident. What kind of actions by the woman and the institution did the process include on an ideal, individual, and socio-material level? To answer this question, I use the surviving records of both the Home and the Federation of the Mother and Child Homes (henceforth Federation). In addition to these, I use the related records in the archive of Miina Sillanpää,<sup>6</sup> the founder of both the Federation and the Home. To contextualize single motherhood in 1940s and 1950s Finland, I rely on contemporary magazines and newspapers.

I use experience and the lived institution as both the methodological tools and the subject of my research. In the conceptualization of experience, I rely on “the new history of experience.” Instead of trying to find anecdotal examples of what “really” happened, experience can be understood as a process in which language, social relations, and cultural meanings become intertwined.<sup>7</sup> Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo approach experience on three levels: as a part of social reality (what happens to people), as a cultural process (how to give meaning and explain what happens), and as an analytical category (a way to analyze the first two). As they highlight, experience is something that needs to be conceptualized analytically to understand the connection between ideas, structures, and individuals in which the culturally, socially, and situationally bound experiences are constructed.<sup>8</sup>

I approach the institution from a combination of ideal, individual, and sociomaterial dimensions to study the history of experience and the lived institution (Fig. 4.1). I see these dimensions as overlapping and the lived institution as an entanglement of all three.

By the ideal dimension, I refer to the imagined, “pre-material” time when the institution was not yet founded but existed in the discussions,

<sup>5</sup> On contraception guidance and abortion, see Helén, *Äidin elämän politiikka*, 239–40; Helén and Yesilova, *Shepherding Desire*, 258–9.

<sup>6</sup> Sillanpää was a Social Democrat Member of Parliament and the first chairperson of the Federation. She kept her position until 1952, when she passed away. See, for example, Korppi-Tommola, *Miina Sillanpää*.

<sup>7</sup> The definition “new history of experience” is used by Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience*, 18. See also Kivimäki, *Reittejä kokemushistoriaan*, 30.

<sup>8</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 12.

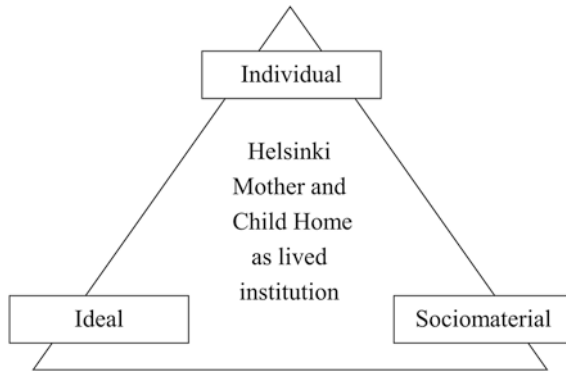


Fig. 4.1 The dimensions of experience

demands, and intentions of working-class women. In this dimension, the linguistic constructions of unmarried motherhood are placed in the center—namely how the understanding of single motherhood was constructed and how the discourse possibly shaped the narrative of single motherhood. The individual dimension provides a way to explore the views of single mothers, the potential residents of the home. How was the institution encountered and understood in their letters and how did the women articulate and appeal to their experiences to obtain residency? With the dimension of sociomateriality, I expand on the construction of the lived institution. Besides language, experience was constructed in the material reality through buildings, spaces, objects, and regulations, among others. With the ideal, individual, and sociomaterial dimensions, it is possible to build a bridge between individuals, the structures in which they act, and the institution they encounter.

Mother and child homes are a significant part of the history of Finnish maternity care, yet these institutions and the experiences related to them have seldom been studied. The surviving archival material has mainly been used in a few institutional and biographical studies,<sup>9</sup> and, for example, the correspondence is mainly unexplored. My chapter will thus shed new light on the ways in which single motherhood was re-negotiated in mid-twentieth-century Finland.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Heinänen, *Lapsen tasa-arvoa tavoittamassa*; Korppi-Tommola, *Miina Sillanpää*; Mälikossa, *Yhteiskunnalle omistettu elämä*.

## THE IDEA OF A SEPARATE HOME

It must be ensured that it is possible for mothers to raise their children as worthy members of society. We *have* maternity care and maternity allowances—and there are not enough of those yet, I know that by numerous delicate examples—but we must also create *mental* possibilities for this matter.<sup>10</sup>

In April 1941, MP Miina Sillanpää gave an interview to the women's magazine *Eeva*, where she determinedly underlined improvements to maternal and child care and continued how the mother and baby home for “unsafe” mothers would be one solution to this problem. Before the concrete building, experiences of the lived institution were constructed in this liminal space where social aspects were present but the concrete materiality was still yet to come. This so-called pre-material time shaped the realities of single motherhood and could be seen as an essential part of the process where the lived institution was produced. As Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo argue:

Experience is not just something that exists or that one is given, it needs to be got and gained, produced even. As experience is produced, the observation of the world through one's senses—and the interpretation of that world through understanding and previous knowledge—also shapes one's expectations of the future.<sup>11</sup>

Discussions and ideas of municipal mother and baby homes were an important part of the linguistic preconditions—which Joan Scott suggests should be examined more precisely—in which experiences are partly constructed.<sup>12</sup> Shifts in attitudes toward unmarried motherhood could be detected, for example, in the language used in initiatives, ideas, and discussions. In this section, I analyze the ideal level and the process of creating a shelter for pregnant unmarried women. What was the context of single motherhood and progress of the women's shelter before the built institution?

Attitudes toward unmarried mothers tightened in the first half of the twentieth century in Europe. The social context of single motherhood was

<sup>10</sup>Naisia, joiden ääni kuuluu. *Eeva*, 1 April 1941, 8.

<sup>11</sup>Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, *Lived Religion and Gender*, 13.

<sup>12</sup>Scott, *The Evidence of Experience*.

overlooked, and public discussion pointed toward bad judgment and emotionally disturbed women. Single mothers were also framed as unfit to raise children.<sup>13</sup> Stigmatization emerged on several levels of society, but from slightly different angles. As different actors tried to solve the problems of single mothers, the negative echoes of unmarried motherhood were defined from above and outside the subjects themselves. The issue of single motherhood raised a broader question: What kind of motherhood should be supported by the state? As historian Pirjo Markkola has shown, maternity policy was an issue that both unified and separated bourgeois and working-class women in the Finnish Parliament. The conservative parties were reluctant to acknowledge the socioeconomic problems caused to women by single motherhood. Instead, in the spirit of moral reform, they suggested illegalization of extramarital relationships. Working-class women took a more realistic stance: Unmarried motherhood would not disappear by prohibiting it, but the state could reduce social problems by providing financial and material support for single women.<sup>14</sup> Working-class women persistently proposed initiatives for municipal homes for unmarried mothers and their children, but the propositions did not lead to concrete actions.<sup>15</sup>

The child allowance and separate homes for single mothers were both on the agenda of the *Sosiaalidemokraattinen työläisnaisliitto* (Social Democratic Women's Union) in 1929. At its convention, representatives discussed the special need for a specific building and criticized how all the state-funded kinds of homes and institutions were established by the bourgeoisie. Because initiatives for municipal homes did not seem to gain success in parliament, working-class women decided to establish such homes privately.<sup>16</sup> A group of women from the labor movement founded the first local Mother and Child Home association in Helsinki in 1936 under the name *Työläisäitien ja lasten kotiyhdistys* (Association for the working-class mothers' and children's home). In the constitutive meeting, the main purpose of the association was to establish a home for "lone mothers" and

<sup>13</sup>In Britain and Germany, for example, they were pushed to give their children up for adoption. See Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe*, 215–16.

<sup>14</sup>Markkola, *Synti ja siveys*, 276.

<sup>15</sup>Heinänen, *Lapsen tasa-arvoa tavoittamassa*, 12.

<sup>16</sup>The Labour Archives of Finland (LAF), Social Democratic Women's Union, Folder C22, Minutes of the XII convention of Finnish Social Democratic Women's Union, 1929.

their children.<sup>17</sup> Board members made field trips to similar kinds of institutions in Denmark and Sweden to see how the living conditions, childcare, and maintenance fees of the residents were organized. The importance of the women's ability to work outside the home was recognized, and for that reason the location in an urban, working-class area of Helsinki was essential.<sup>18</sup> The first home was opened in 1942, and at the same time the association changed its name to *Helsingin Ensikoti* (Helsinki Mother and Child Home) leaving any reference to the working class out of the name. A few years later, in September 1945, the national umbrella organization, *Ensi Kotien Liitto* (Federation of Mother and Child Homes)<sup>19</sup> was established. The City of Helsinki provided a building lot for the association, and the government allocated some funding for the Home. Besides that, funding was mainly raised from the Finnish Slot Machine Association, and international support helped to provide clothing and goods.<sup>20</sup>

However, the idea of a separate home for unmarried mothers was not totally new. The Christian shelter movement was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and one target group of the international movement were "fallen" women—single, usually working-class women, who were caught having extramarital sexual relationships. These relationships became a public matter especially if it led to pregnancy.<sup>21</sup> As historian Pat Thane has noted, not all single mothers were from the working class, but the working class was often the target of control and regulation. This has produced material whereby access to the lives of the lower classes can be gained. Compared to the lower classes, middle-class citizens were less often limited by social control. Not all non-working-class families were particularly well-off, but better-off families could more easily support their daughter financially or arrange a discreet adoption or abortion.<sup>22</sup>

In post-war Finland, single mothers were understood either as heroic war widows or unmarried, working-class women who had strayed from the narrow path of decent sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Single motherhood existed on the

<sup>17</sup> LAF, Helsinki Mother and Child Home (HMCH), Folder CA1, Minutes of the constitutive meeting, 11 December 1936.

<sup>18</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder CA1, Minutes of the board meeting, 12 November 1938.

<sup>19</sup> At present *The Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters*.

<sup>20</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder UA1, Printed publications, "Ensi koti. Työläisäitien ja lasten yhdistyksen uusi koti äideille ja lapsille," 5–8 and Folder CA1, Minutes 1936–41.

<sup>21</sup> Markkola, *Synti ja siveys*, 212–14.

<sup>22</sup> Thane, *Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England*, 12–16.

<sup>23</sup> May, *Lone Motherhood Past and Present*, 28.

margins of new legislation, and this was an issue left-wing female politicians wanted to change. Sillanpää appealed several times to Members of Parliament and demanded changes in attitudes and in legislation toward “lone mothers.” Sillanpää, along with others working for the cause, emphasized the father’s responsibility and questioned why women were seen as unrespectable when pregnancy was the consequence of a relationship between two people, a woman and a man.<sup>24</sup>

Despite working-class women’s active efforts, governmental support remained mainly aimed at nuclear families. In Finland, as well as in the wider Nordic context, members of the bourgeoisie saw single motherhood as a threat both to marriage and to the existing class structure.<sup>25</sup> Working-class women, on the other hand, wanted to bridge the gap between respectable and unrespectable motherhood. In this process, the conceptual choices appeared to be thought-out decisions. In the source materials, the concept of the “fallen” woman was replaced with new terminology: single mothers were described as “lone,” “unsafe,” or “extra-marital” mothers, or simply just “mothers.”<sup>26</sup> Another fracture point can be seen in the relation between religion and the institution. Instead of spiritual guidance, the association board and its members stressed single mothers’ “mental” preconditions and how their improvement was possible by carrying out educational work. That does not mean that the working class was particularly unreligious.<sup>27</sup> However, whereas Christian shelters for “fallen” women emphasized the link between God’s omnipotence and decent work, the Mother and Child Home concentrated on the role of labor and excluded the evangelical views of salvation in its intentions.

### IMAGINED AND ASPIRED INSTITUTION IN WOMEN’S LETTERS

When the first facility opened in June 1942 in Helsinki, single women’s interest toward the home exceeded expectations. Nationwide interest was understandable, since it was the first concrete, built institution for unmarried working-class mothers-to-be. Potential residents had high hopes of

<sup>24</sup> LAF, Archive of Miina Sillanpää (AMS), Folder HB4, Speeches and writings. Women’s issues. 1907–50.

<sup>25</sup> Peterson, *Maternity Policy and the Making of the Norwegian*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder CA1, Minutes 1936–41, Folder H11, Annual reports 1941–42.

<sup>27</sup> On the evangelical shelter movement, see Markkola, *Synti ja siveys*, 211–14. On the lived religion of the working-class, see, for example, Markkola, *Working-class Women Living Religion in Finland*; Markkola, *Uskon paikat*.



the Home, which can be read from the application letters written to the Home or directly to MP Miina Sillanpää. From the correspondence, it is possible to analyze how women pursued residency. I understand this as an individual dimension in order to shed light on the lived reality of single motherhood in twentieth-century Finland. Women from all over the country approached the Home, and it seemed to be somewhat unclear both from the perspective of the individual and the institution how the home municipality affected possible residency. In newspapers, the Federation promoted accessibility, and in the organization's action plan women "from Helsinki and elsewhere" were welcomed to the Home.<sup>28</sup> However, applicants from Helsinki were favored unless a "particularly touching" case from elsewhere arose.<sup>29</sup> Based on annual reports, usually approximately half of the residents came from places other than Helsinki. For example, in 1942 there were 86 residents in total, and 42 of them came from other municipalities. This distribution followed the same pattern in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>30</sup>

The letters addressed to Sillanpää and the Home show that even though single motherhood was stigmatizing, this stigma was also a key to gaining residency. In addition to the hometown, another significant—perhaps more important—factor seemed to be women's ability to describe their living conditions touchingly enough. They articulated their experience very openly and straightforwardly when they appealed to Sillanpää. For example, a 23-year woman from the region of Oulu wrote:

I hereby most humbly turn to you to inquire if there would be room and opportunities to come to this home of yours over the bad times. I'm expecting a child at the turn of March and I have no security for that time. I have still tried to be in service, but it seems to be getting too heavy, I've been having such bad days. I am 23 years old and enrolled at [--]. For the past 3 years I have been working near Helsinki in [--], which is also my place of registration. I left from there in the Fall in the hope that I would be allowed to stay at my late mother's sister's place over this time, but I was not welcomed there at all so I have to go into service with a lower salary than usual. I have no savings because the money has been spent very carefully on the necessary clothing, and the father of the child has gone to sea, I don't know

<sup>28</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder H11, Action Plan 1942.

<sup>29</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder CA1, Minutes 1936–41.

<sup>30</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder H11, Annual reports. 1942–59. In 1959, 68 out of 133 residents were out-of-towners.

where he is. I have been without my parents since I was 1 ½ years old and I have been raised by strangers, and now I, poor thing, have no place to sleep when I leave this [work] place. I can't do it longer than this month because it always makes me so tired. There's always some worries. I'm asking for a quick answer from you whether I'll get in or not, and in a positive sense I would like to know how much before labor I can come, because I'm so hopeless and this if anything wears a person down and keeps the mood low.<sup>31</sup>

The living conditions of single mothers who entered the Home were portrayed as serene while staying at the institution, but the correspondence from non-residents reveals another kind of reality outside of the institution. Women opened up about events that had led to their unmarried pregnancy and referred also to the father's responsibility. In cases where the extramarital relationship was with a married man, it was also mentioned as a reason for the lacking alimony. Writers describe how they had read about the Home in newspapers and how in their hometown they have been advised to contact Sillanpää directly in these matters. Sillanpää was known as a person who had political leverage, and it seems that the writers trusted her and the idea that the Home was established for them. Residency was seen as a solution to a difficult social and economic situation, and women pursued this through articulating their (bad) life experiences in application letters. Single motherhood was often described through the concept of unsafety, but the framing and tactics women used varied. One aspect occurring in the letters is the fear of paternal power. For example, one advocate wrote on behalf of a woman under 20 years of age:

There is such a case that the daughter of a working-class family will become a mother in February. She has a home. Father, mother, and a brother. But the father does not understand the difficult situation of his daughter and therefore she would like to get out of the home before the labor begins. Her father always speaks with threats that if it happens to his daughter, that she becomes a mother of a lonely child, so then she must leave the home.<sup>32</sup>

In this case, the pregnancy was kept as a secret from the woman's father and the correspondence does not reveal how things resolved. There were most likely other similar cases, and the threat of homelessness was real.

<sup>31</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. December 1945.

<sup>32</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. 1945.

Paternal power also affected families belonging to other social classes. For example, in Britain financial support for unmarried mothers was a heated question, and middle-class families were persuaded to support their pregnant daughters and take them home. Some fathers were described as particularly steadfast in their resistance.<sup>33</sup> This demonstrates how the question was both financial and social: the stigma of unmarried motherhood was a factor that extended also to the rest of the family.

Even though a typical resident of the Home was a young, primigravida woman, not all applicants fell into this category. Older unmarried women with children also approached Sillanpää. The purpose of the Home was not clear to everyone: some women hoped to get childcare organized through it. In one response, Sillanpää noted that mother and child homes were intended for first-time mothers and they were not children's homes nor places for mothers to leave their offspring.<sup>34</sup> This implies what it meant to be a single parent at that time: even though the paternal fear was not directly present for all single mothers, women were affected by society's patriarchal structures. Society's safety net was missing, and the future seemed hopeless if there was not a male breadwinner. In these situations, one possibility was to end up as a recipient of municipal poor relief.<sup>35</sup> One aim of the Federation was to prevent unmarried mothers from having to resort to poor relief. This was important for women of the labor movement because as a poor relief recipient, one lost one's right to vote.<sup>36</sup> The implication was that only the well-off were proper citizens. In the public discussion, unmarried motherhood was framed as a working-class issue, but the Federation emphasized the availability to all who felt "unsafe." There were, however, many more applicants than there were free beds. The "advertised" social security did not meet the realized accessibility. The Federation was aware of this, and in her letters back to applicants, Sillanpää lamented the lack of new homes.<sup>37</sup> Thus, a recurring worry for the Federation was the combination of the large number of newcomers compared to the lack of money to build new homes.

<sup>33</sup> Thane, *Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England*, 15–16.

<sup>34</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. Response letter, 1951.

<sup>35</sup> Harjula, *Hoitoonpääsyn hierarkiat*, 221–2.

<sup>36</sup> This was removed from the law in 1945. See, for example, Harjula, *Hoitoonpääsyn hierarkiat*, 226.

<sup>37</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder H11, Annual reports 1943–45 and LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH.

The harsh material and financial conditions are emphasized in the life stories of single mothers during the 1940s and 1950s. The main task of unmarried mothers was to guarantee maintenance for the child and to survive with shame and stigma, while the caring aspect of parenting seemed to come second.<sup>38</sup> In their letters, women appealed to the need for emotional support as well as insufficient living conditions, as an unmarried mother-to-be wrote when she applied for a place in 1942:

I would be unspeakably grateful and happy if I could spend my maternity leave from 1st April possibly till the end of June at the mother and child home. I'll pay everything myself. I'm more in the need of emotional support and guidance, and I believe I could get it there, where there are fellows with the same [mis]fortune and at the same time I would feel safe, knowing that appropriate help is near when needed at that very strange and often fatal time, too, for the first-timer.<sup>39</sup>

The need for emotional support and guidance appears as one strategy in applications, but it was often narrated together with other social, material, and financial worries. Women emphasized their lack of parents, supportive relatives, and concrete home and shelter, but on the other hand they described themselves as “otherwise healthy” and “proper” citizens in order to gain residency.<sup>40</sup> Despite the obvious distress, most of the letters had this suitably restrained tone, where the women described their despair in a civilized manner. Historian Johanna Annola has studied how lower-class “fallen” women had different written strategies when they approached their superiors when applying to Christian shelter homes. She describes these tactics as “letter performances” in which the phrases women used prove that they acknowledged the power structure that existed in the communication that came from “below.”<sup>41</sup> The women who approached Sillanpää used similar kinds of phrases, like “Honorable economic counsellor Sillanpää” and the friendly, but formal enough “Dear Comrade” and “Aunt Miina.”<sup>42</sup>

However, the letters also included impassioned descriptions of the women’s hopelessness. In some letters, the misery was expressed through

<sup>38</sup> May, *Changing Notions of Lone Motherhood*, 129–31.

<sup>39</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. December 1942, Helsinki.

<sup>40</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. April 1945.

<sup>41</sup> Annola, *Naisvankien kirjeet 1800- ja 1900-lukujen vaihteen Suomessa*, 38–9.

<sup>42</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH.

outbursts that did not meet the ideals of a caring mother. One mother-to-be described her miserable feelings during pregnancy as follows:

So I don't know who will take care of this child, because at least I don't feel any obligations to take care of or give birth to this child. [...] I am expecting [a child] losing my [vacancy] and there is no special place of residence so I thought I would run to the maternity home. I would most politely ask the Honored Economic Counsellor Sillanpää for a quick answer because there is no permanent residence.<sup>43</sup>

What happened to the applicant if she did not frame herself as “poor but decent”? In her two-page reply, Sillanpää stated that the application was incoherent. Nevertheless, she worried for the unborn child and gave instructions about what to do if the woman did not want to keep the child. On the other hand, Sillanpää described how many women's maternal instincts had awakened at the Home, but how in this case there would be no free beds available. Instead, she encouraged the woman to apply to some other Mother and Child Home.<sup>44</sup>

In several letters, women wrote how despite their poor living conditions, they would pay the expenses themselves. It was nevertheless possible to apply for financial assistance for the fees from the municipal welfare board. However, if a woman was indigent and forced to apply for public assistance, she faced the risk of being considered a recipient of poor relief. This could cause a long-lasting stigma.<sup>45</sup> Women's reference to healthy, proper, and hard-working citizens discloses that although the stigmatized pregnancy and indigency were keys to get residency, they were often expressed through the ideals of bourgeois femininity. Sociologist Beverley Skeggs outlines how formations of shame are essentially linked to class and

<sup>43</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. June 1951.

<sup>44</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder F8, Applications to the HMCH. Response letter. April 1945. New homes opened at the turn of the 1950s in Oulu (northern Finland), Imatra (eastern Finland), and Turku (western Finland).

<sup>45</sup> Social assistance was discretionary and remained rather a loan than a benefit; hence it had to be repaid. If a person was unable to repay, they could be judged as a regular recipient of poor relief. The boundary between occasional and permanent poor relief was dependent on the authorities of different municipalities. Until 1945, recipients of poor relief lost their right to vote. However, the 1945 amendment was somewhat artificial because permanent recipients of poor relief were placed under guardianship, which also led to the loss of the voting right. The situation remained as such from the Poor Relief Act of 1922 (in effect till 1956). See Harjula, Köyhä, kelvoton, kansalainen?, 11–12.

gender; it involves awareness of social norms and is shaped by the recognition and judgment of others. Respectability is often pursued through actions that are equated to the imaginary middle class, which is often seen as the embodiment of elegant and sophisticated behavior.<sup>46</sup> Historians Minna Harjula and Heikki Kokko have theorized on the temporality of experience by showing how experiences are layered and overlapping within the present and previous generations.<sup>47</sup> The ways in which women approached the institution can be understood through this kind of layered, societal knowledge, which working-class women used to operate with when they dealt with people that represented their superiors.

### ENCOUNTERS WITH BUILT AND REGULATED SPACE

The materiality and material culture of an institution are always connected to its social conditions. In this section, I analyze encounters between unmarried mothers and the built institution from the perspective of sociomateriality. Paul Leonardi describes how sociomateriality can be studied in practices where material elements of the institution overlap with phenomena we typically define as “social,” such as institutions, norms, and discourses.<sup>48</sup> Single mothers’ encounters with the Home were practices or moments in which the lived institution was produced. What kind of (material) institution did women encounter when they applied for residency and lived at the Home?

The Mother and Child Home was a new, four-story building that provided facilities for 40 women. As described earlier, before the house was built, the Federation actively sought to be displayed in the media, especially magazines and newspapers. After opening the first Home, the Federation continued to put forth this public image. The Finnish family and women’s magazine *Kotiliesi* wrote about the institution in 1942:

But the Mother and Child Home is not only thought of as a place of safety and recreation. In addition to the home, it will also give its protégées

<sup>46</sup> Skeggs, *Formations of Class & Gender*, 93, 123–4. See also Morris and Munt, *Classed Formations of Shame*, 231–2.

<sup>47</sup> Harjula and Kokko, *The Scene of Experience*. See also Kokko, *Temporalization of Experiencing*, 114; Harjula in this book.

<sup>48</sup> Leonardi, *Materiality, Sociomateriality, and Socio-Technical Systems*, 34–8. See also De Moura and De Souza Bispo, *Sociomateriality*, 352. On materiality, see, for example, Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity*; Vahtikari, *Reminiscing about the Baby Box*.

professional guidance and training in all the most important duties of a homemaker, which especially most young unwed mothers have never been familiar with before. In order to fulfill both of these purposes, the building of the Mother and Child Home, from the basement to the attic, has required its unique and careful planning. Together with Miina Sillanpää, architect Elna Kiljander designed the house, and the architect then realized the plans in a successful final solution. Air, sun, and light, which are important for children's growth, have been the builders' first goal.<sup>49</sup>

The article exemplifies how the Federation presented the Home as a sanctuary and an educational institution for single mothers. The importance of modern material elements were presented from the perspective of child welfare, whereas the women's place of safety and recreation were connected to the institution's wider societal function: producing adequate homemakers. This was understandable, since often the hardest time was after leaving the institution, and the staff of the Home also seemed to be worried about this. In their letters to former residents, typical questions concerned alimony matters and information about possible marriage. Socioeconomic questions, such as sorting out income, child care, and housing, caused troubles. These concerns can be noticed in the correspondence with former residents:

When Muhammad does not come to the mountain, the mountain will come to You. It has been such a long time and nothing has been heard of You and your little one, so I will take to inquire. It would be so interesting for us to know how you have begun to cope in your life with your child. As I recall, you went to your former position and got someone to take care of the child. Has everything now gone as you thought it would, roughly well? Maybe you've already got married. You could have had time to do that too during this time.<sup>50</sup>

The inquiry and information of a realized marriage itself is interesting. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the marital status of former residents was also compiled in annual reports along with other statistical information on their background. Besides that, it was also listed separately how many women managed to get married after they had left the institution.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Turvattomien äitien ja pienokaisten oma ensikoti toimii. *Kotiliäsi*, 14 July 1942, 388–9.

<sup>50</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder FB1, Letters 1946–50. A letter for a former resident, July 1949.

<sup>51</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder H11, Annual reports, 1942–59.

Education was a fixed part of daily life in the Home, and the main purpose was after all to train women to be not only good mothers but also acceptable wives. This fits the wider North American and European context. During the inter- and post-war era, the emerging social, behavioral, and human sciences started to regulate the family, and it was viewed both as a source of morale and a site for concern. In Finnish context also, the period was strongly dominated by the male breadwinner model and housewife ideology.<sup>52</sup> As Bergenheim argues, in post-war Finland matrimony and family was placed at the center of the “population question.” The post-war peak in divorces was seen as an unwanted sign of loosening family ties. Especially women were accused of neglecting their “reproductive duty.”<sup>53</sup> In this framing, single mothers did not represent the desired example of the fulfillment of that duty, and issues of single motherhood were not on the priority list of the emerging welfare state. In this sense, it is understandable that women were pushed toward marriage. The reality was that marriage was often the best way to avoid the economic and social hardship of single motherhood.

To promote the social and material conditions of single mothers, the Federation addressed its message through the media.<sup>54</sup> For this purpose, the Federation commissioned a short film that was shot in the Home and featured Sillanpää. The documentary took a stand on behalf of unmarried mothers. It starts with a quite dramatic setting, where a young, presumably unmarried pregnant woman considers jumping off a bridge but ends up at the doors of the Mother and Child Home. The life and atmosphere inside the Home is cheerful compared to the opening scene, and the building is pictured as modern, spacious, and bright. Happy mothers are portrayed with their newborn babies, who nap on a balcony called the “sundeck.” The film was a clear attempt to create a shelter and social acceptance for single mothers. The Federation’s purpose was narrated as follows:

<sup>52</sup> Michel, *Moving Targets*, 122–9. About Finland, see, for example, Lindberg, *Mannen som objekt och problem*, 102–3; Hytönen and Rantanen, *Onnen aika?*, 163–4.

<sup>53</sup> Bergenheim, *From Pronatalism to Salvaging Relationships*, 146–7.

<sup>54</sup> Turning to the media was a common practice, for example, in Britain as well as in Finland. The British organization the National Council for Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC) was a voluntary organization founded in 1918 to work “with and for all single mothers,” originally to prevent high infant mortality. The organization published, for example, a film called “Unmarried.” See Thane, *Voluntary Action in the ‘Welfare State,’* 133, 137–8.



Until these days, the heavy burden of life has been on the shoulders of the lone mother. While the father of the child, free of shame, bears the name of an honorable man, the mother of the child has been stigmatized with the brand of shame. The Federation of the Mother and Child Homes fights against this double standard.<sup>55</sup>

Working-class women regularly criticized the gendered double standards and saw them as a form of class oppression.<sup>56</sup> The Federation fought against structural discrimination by offering both material and social welfare for women. The institution operated at the interface between the state and the citizen, and it can be seen as an early form of social services that promoted maternity and reproductive health care for single mothers from the lower classes. As Harjula and Kokko have theorized on encounters with welfare state institutions, the Home can be understood as “scene” in which social change was experienced, but simultaneously its principles relied and built on the previous practices of social care.<sup>57</sup> Everyday life within the Home included mandatory elements that can be compared with Christian shelters. Markkola conceptualizes daily life in Christian shelters as “caring power.” Despite the Home metaphor, the women’s everyday life was strictly regulated, and re-emerging as a member of society was possible through hard work.<sup>58</sup> Caring power bound support and control together. In institutional care, it was (and is) used as a means to modify the behavior of the individual. By conforming to the caring power, “fallen” women adapted to their caregivers’ perceptions of a respectable way of life.<sup>59</sup>

A similar kind of power structure can be seen in the principles of the Mother and Child Home: Women’s rights and duties inside the institution were listed carefully, and the importance of carrying out domestic education can be seen from the structure of the building. The annual reports of the Home described how every mother had to carry out household work, which included tasks such as cleaning and laundry. For example, the statute of 1950 placed women as subordinates to the rules and personnel of

<sup>55</sup> Yle, Elävä arkisto. Quotation from the short film *Ensi koti*, 7:40–7:56. A short film ordered by the Federation. 1948.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Nätkin, *Kamppailu suomalaisesta äitiydestä*, 33–40.

<sup>57</sup> See Harjula and Kokko, *The Scene of Experience*.

<sup>58</sup> Markkola, *Synti ja siveys*, 211, 237.

<sup>59</sup> Annola, *Naisvankien kirjeet 1800- ja 1900-lukujen Suomessa*, 33; Siippainen, *Sukupuolisuhteet, hallinta ja subjektifikaatio*, 18–19.

the Home: “Mothers in the Home need to behave tidily and decently. A mother who has received a reminder from the Director due to bad behavior or is otherwise unfit to be in the home is at the Director’s order immediately obliged to leave the home.”<sup>60</sup> Women were allowed to work outside the Home, but they had a curfew and still had to carry out their duties as residents. Sillanpää frequently emphasized the importance of the educational aspects of these tasks.<sup>61</sup> She said the following to the family and news magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti*:

In addition to theoretical and educational lectures on practical work, teaching includes childcare, tailoring, housekeeping, cleaning, cooking, and laundry. We need better mothers and better maintained homes. It is really time to get past this outdated belief that a woman, because of her sex, can be a child- and housekeeper without education. And society is obligated to give the necessary education.<sup>62</sup>

Notable is especially the sentence where Sillanpää states that the purpose of domestic education is to generate “better” mothers. This was understandable in the sense that presumably many of the residents would be young women with a child, possibly living for the first time on their own. The ethos of work was connected to decency, and it could be assumed that the Mother and Child Homes would, for example, more likely get aid for their work through emphasizing that the institution guided women to successful motherhood.

According to Kirsi Saarikangas, who has studied suburban post-war Helsinki, space, time, inhabitants, and material elements of the environment act together and shaped the Homes as a lived space. In new modern apartments, rooms were organized according to bodily functions (separation of eating, sleeping, and “leisure”). Young mothers in particular praised the new amenities, which produced feelings of joy and happiness with their spaciousness and modern conveniences.<sup>63</sup> The material elements of the Helsinki Mother and Child Home followed these bodily functions. In the light of the source material, the hierarchy of caring power did not

<sup>60</sup> LAF, HMCH, Folder H11, Annual reports, 1948, 6–7; Folder HD1, Statute, 1950.

<sup>61</sup> LAF, AMS, Folder HB4, Speeches and writings. Women’s issues. 1907–50.

<sup>62</sup> Äidit ja lapset saavat kodin, *Suomen Kuvalehti*, 25 April 1942, 530–1.

<sup>63</sup> Saarikangas, Multisensory Memories and the Space of Suburban Childhood, 30–1, 35. See also England, Fannin, and Hazen, *Reproductive Geographies*, 1–10. On bodily organizing, see Männistö-Funk, Rykelmät, 183.

seem to cause conflicts between the residents and personnel of the Home in the 1940s and 1950s. The earlier poor living conditions of the residents and encounters with modern spaces together with the Federation's policy of dismantling the stigma can explain the absence of conflicts. Aid was perhaps experienced more horizontally among single mothers, since the forces behind the Home represented the needs of the same social group: the Home was organized by working-class women for working-class women.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have studied how experience and the lived institution were constructed within encounters between single mothers and the Helsinki Mother and Child Home. My interest lies especially in the "process of becoming" a resident, which I have studied from the ideal, individual, and sociomaterial dimension. With these dimensions, I have analyzed the way in which the judgmental narrative of single motherhood changed toward more a permissive one (ideal), the tactics women used while applying to the home (individual), and the material, built environment the women encountered (sociomaterial). These dimensions are entangled and overlapping, but they also reveal what processes were connected to the history of single motherhood, the women's shelter, and maternity care. By analyzing the preconditions through these dimensions, it has been possible to contextualize the shifting sphere of single motherhood in post-war Finland.

Based on my analysis, I have examined three main processes that happened within the home. First, the discursive preconditions of unmarried motherhood changed. The establishment process was preceded by a vivid discussion of the status of unmarried mothers, which shaped the new public conception of single motherhood. Working-class women replaced the concept of the "fallen" woman with a less evaluative terminology while debating the rights of "lone" mothers. With this conceptual change, they also tried to detach shame, immorality, and unrespectability from single motherhood. Although the political language became more respectful toward single mothers, the experiences of shame, together with the material and social problems, did not vanish along with the establishment of the institution. Shame can be seen as a part of the layered experiences that were connected to single motherhood. Even the structures and institutions of the society changed, and these changes were reflected in personal

attitudes and experiences slowly and not necessarily linearly with the development of welfare state institutions.

Second, the Home was one important milestone for working-class women's maternity policy, but due the lack of governmental support, women had to organize the institution privately. This meant limited funding and new homes being built slowly, but on the other hand it enabled the independence to draw up the institution's rules. Within the Home, the role of religion diminished. Compared to Christian shelters for "fallen" women, where through hard work and by God's mercy women were able to return to society, religion was conspicuously absent. Instead of being the regulator of daily life, religion was transformed into a private matter.

Third, the Mother and Child Home both influenced and serve as an example of the wider societal change that was connected to nascent welfare policies. Questions like what kind of motherhood should be supported by the state arose in public discussion in the early twentieth century, and in post-war Finland, these matters started to be addressed as social services, which are at present seen as an integral part of the welfare state. The Helsinki Mother and Child Home was one institution that contributed to, was connected to, and continued this development.

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