NOT AT ALL COSTS

Serbian Non-Mothers discussing Motherhood

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Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Gender Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in Gender Studies

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Vienna, Austria
2025

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Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 20, 875 words

Entire manuscript: 23, 208 words

Vienna, 06 June 2025

Una Radonjic

ABSTRACT OR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to understand what draws women further or closer to becoming mothers, in order to contribute to the conversation about (non)-motherhood and childfree women, in the context of increasing number of women worldwide who identify as childfree or forgo motherhood. I interviewed 12 women from Serbia who are not mothers and who are urban and with university education, to test, by using qualitative research, the idea that the motivation for motherhood as the "central goal in life" decreases with the increase of level of education (Tomanović, 2017, p.7). However, in my findings, only one woman identified herself as childfree, while others were desiring or keeping motherhood as an open option for the future. My findings show that women are still drawn to motherhood in order to conform to femininity and they ideally envision motherhood within the straight path of marriage and reproduction that promises "good life" (Ahmed, 2006), in a relationship that is stable, secure and based on the intimacy, love and equality between partners who embark on parenthood equally committed and motivated. At the same time, this group of women shows a high level of awareness about the difficulties of mothering in a neoliberal capitalist and patriarchal motherhood regime in Serbia (Vilenica, 2013), and as a consequence they were postponing the transition in wait for better economic and personal conditions. Ultimately, by using a qualitative approach I was able to capture the nuances and heterogeneity in women's deliberation and introspection about motherhood, with the hope that this thesis would open a more complex and open conversation about different (non)-motherhood institutions, practices, and affective experiences, and critically explore different paths regarding (non)-motherhood transition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS OR DEDICATIONS

There are so many people I would like to thank.

First, the women who took part in the research. Thank you for your trust and time.

Further, I would like to thank my parents, my grandmothers, my brother and my life partner Manuel for their love and support.

I also thank my supervisor Eva Fodor and my second reader Jelena Petrovic for their guidance and valuable feedback.

The most special thank you goes to Slađa, Miljan and Melisa, my dear friends who made me feel like at home and in family during my stay in Vienna.

Ultimately, I would like to dedicate this thesis to students in Serbia.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Childfree or voluntarily childless women are women who intentionally and voluntarily choose never to become mothers (Wilak, 2023; Peterson, 2015; Gillespie, 2003; Salgado & Magalhães, 2023; Colledge & Runacres, 2023). The emphasis is on the concepts of choice and freedom, as expressions of agency and positive identity (Salgado & Magalhães, 2023; Mandujano-Salazar, 2021; Blackstone & Stewart, 2016); therefore, the term childfree should not be confused or conflated with childless, which is broader and can also include involuntary childlessness (Wilak, 2023; Colledge & Runacres, 2023).

Authors on childfree women portray the childfree status and identity as a growing trend, specifically in Western European countries (Peterson, 2015, p. 183), due to the increasing number of overall childless individuals (Roy, Schumm, & Britt, 2014 as cited in Peterson 2015, p. 183). Recent qualitative studies on childfree women across different European national contexts support these claims by using statistic data to demonstrate the increase in numbers of women who do not want to become mothers-for example, in Portugal (Salgado & Magalhães, 2023), in Spain for all age cohorts of women (Beltrán & Samaranch, 2024), as well in Poland (Wilak, 2023), but also outside Europe, such as in the Philippines (Chua et al., 2025) and South Africa (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016).

Further, more countries are contributing to the academic research on childfree women, such as Mexico (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021) and Turkey (Parlak & Tekin, 2020). In these contexts, there is a strong orientation towards motherhood and pronatalism, making childfree women a hard-to-reach group (Parlak & Tekin, 2020, p. 24) due to the stigma they face. Stigma that childfree women experience for transgressing the normative femininity by rejecting motherhood (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016, p.455) has been found and document in different

cultural and geographical contexts: in the UK (Colledge & Runacres, 2023), United States (Blackstone & Stewart, 2016), Australia (Rich et al., 2011), Hong Kong (Gietel-Basten & Yeung, 2023), South Africa (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016) as well as in a country with high gender equality such as Sweden (Peterson, 2015).

Childfree women are "coming-out" in different national contexts, as a result of continuous challenges that feminism movement and scholars have posed to the sex-gender system, enabling greater visibility and recognition to different gender identities and experiences (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021, p.1). Additionally, the increased global trend of individualization enabled women more control over their bodies and reproductive right (Peterson, 2015, p. 183).

Qualitative research on childfree women documented reasons these women expressed for their choice-which are diverse-but most common are: increased freedom and control in many different aspects of their lives, lack of maternal instinct and lack of interest in children, fear of the pregnancy and post-partum period, etc. (Peterson 2015; Salgado & Magalhães, 2023; Gillespie, 2003; Wilak, 2023; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016).

However, due to the centrality that motherhood has for women's adult identity (Bugden et al., 2021, p. 2) and pronatalism (Salgado & Magalhães, 2023; Rich et al., 2011; Bimha & Chadwick, 2016) decision to become or remain childfree it not always easy nor straightforward, hence some articulate their decision earlier or later (Gillespie, 2003, p.125) or can remain undecided (Donath et al., 2022). As Donath et al. (2022, p.2) argue, not very much attention has been given to women who are debating motherhood, who are undecided or introspective about motherhood, especially in the national contexts of high value for familism, pronatalism, and higher fertility rate. In such contexts looking into the ambivalent and introspective attitudes inside the motherhood decision-making process are especially interesting as they, on one hand, challenge pronatalism, by not taking reproduction for granted, and at same time challenge post-

feminist value of firm choices, whether it is choice to become a motherhood or become childfree (Donath et. al, 2022, p.13). Similarly, in the nonbinary manner, Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė (2021, p.173) in their research on childless women relation to other persons' children, identified what they call "childfree attitudes". Childfree attitude does not necessarily mean giving up on being mothers, but questions the necessity of having children (Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2021, p. 173), which can be seen as a form of agency in the context of Latvia-which like in many other Eastern European countries-exerts strong pronatalist pressure and social exclusion of women who are not mothers (Šumskaitė, 2024, p.98).

While I aimed to conduct research on childfree women in Serbia, only one participant identified herself as childfree-as a woman who chose never to become mother. In total, I interviewed 12 women from Serbia, aged 30 to 40, living in urban areas, with university level education, and employed. All but one either desired motherhood or at least considered it as a possibility in the future. This research aimed to understand what draws women closer to or further from (non)motherhood. Additionally, by applying a more non-binary lens rather than viewing (non)motherhood as a fixed choice, I aimed to explore whether these choices, intentions, and aspirations are always clear-cut, unhesitant, and free of ambivalence. In other words, I was looking to see if I could find "childfree attitudes" (Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2021, 173) or critical introspection about motherhood (Donath et. al, 2022, p.2).

Serbia is an especially interesting context to investigate. First, in the past 30 years it has experienced significant political and economic structural changes that have impacted the motherhood regime both in terms of motherhood ideology and practice (Vilenica, 2013). From emancipatory and communitarian post-socialist regime of two-earner family model in which women balanced work, motherhood, and socialist activism (Bracewell, 1996, p.25), it

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transitioned to the neoliberal economy, infused with ethno-nationalist discourse in which it is duty of Serbian women to give birth and preserve the nation (Drezgić, 2010, p. 958), amidst degraded social reproduction system (Vilenica, 2014). In Serbia, becoming motherhood equals with becoming a mature female adult (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p.54). Heterofamilism is still the dominant ideology of organization of social life, and it is based on pronounced gender asymmetry and gendered division of labor in which the invisible labor of care is performed by women (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016). Heterofamilism is also reflected in the fact that, while lesbian and queer mothers and families exist, they have no legal recognition (Mirković & Jerković, 2021, p.4).

In my research I draw on sociological and feminism theories and authors to explain the broader context in Serbia, such as gender and motherhood order, familism, in which women imagine and make sense of their (non) motherhood aspirations, desires, and intentions, as well how they interpret and live it. First, I will look into whether women want or not to become mothers, the reasons for their intention, and how they make sense of this. Second, since the average age in Serbia for having a child from year 2023 is 28. 4 (European Commission, 2023), considered that these women were "behind the schedule" especially within the context of Serbia in which is pronounced the "good timing" and the dangerous of "later motherhood" (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p.14), I investigate into the reasons these women are still not mothers and what are the conditions necessary for transitioning to motherhood.

My findings are that motherhood still holds an irreplaceable importance in women's lives despite the fact that it is not their central goal (Kričković Pele, 2014, p. 66; Tomanović, 2017; p.8). The fact all of them, except the childfree woman, were intensively reflecting, making plans and weighing their options, even if some of them were questioning if their desire for motherhood is real, the picture of the straight path of good life that includes coupling and

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reproduction (Ahmed, 2006) was too strong to forgo motherhood. However, if we look at their introspection and delay from the point of view that these women live in the system of high value for motherhood and familism (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016), the introspection and ambivalence (Donath et al, 2022) of some women could be considered as challenging to the pronatalist and familism order.

Further, I find that while the delay of these women is clearly influenced by macro-structures, such as precarious system of social reproduction and the personal economic situation that was personally perceived as unstable, given the context of Serbia and the "eternal crisis" (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p.34), as well as the pressure from their surroundings, it can be read as a form of preserving their own personal well-being and wait for conditions that are more favorable for them to become mothers. Additionally, women who were single were looking for a partner who would represent the ideals of equality and autonomy in relationships and parenthood. While they discourse was challenging the gender and familism regime ideals in Serbia that are based on gender asymmetry and the tenacity of the traditional masculinity and male breadwinner normative (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p.52), their discourse still positioned motherhood within the ideal of the romantic family that ultimately is privatized, naturalized and individualized (Week, 2021).

Therefore, I conclude suggesting that though motherhood is a personal decision, given the large system of heterofamilism and gender system that conflates motherhood with womanhood (Bugden et al., 2021, p.1), it should be submitted to a more complex, open and honest social conversation, especially through feminism. The focus on feminism is because the governing regime in Serbia often uses discussions on gender equality reforms to promote and mobilize anti-gender and conservative discourses (Lončar, 2024, p. 12). Given this political climate, I consider important to foster critical dialogue from the academia and feminism that recognizes

and respects the diverse experiences and practices of motherhood, including voluntary non-motherhood, as well as those who remain undecided or uncertain about their reproductive choices.

CHAPTER TWO: GUIDING LITERATURE IN THE INTERNATIONAL AND SERBIAN CONTEXT

Childfree, voluntary childless, debaters, postponers-Diversity of women who are not mothers

My research began as a quest to identify, give visibility to, and understand the experience and the choice of becoming a childfree woman in Serbia. However, as I could only find one person that identified firmly as so, the focus expanded to explore the reasons behind the non-mother status of women who are over 30 and their motivation for (non)motherhood. Further, I wanted to find out whether they want children, what draws them closer or further from motherhood, and how they negotiate this path. As Šumskaitė (2024, p.85) argues, non-motherhood, both in its realization through being childfree or postponing, is a valid identity and experience in the contemporary world, especially given that in the last decades in Europe there has been an increase in voluntary childlessness as well as in the age in which women have their first child (Tanturri et al., 2015, pp.5-6). These two groups, therefore, can be considered connected.

The increase in voluntary childlessness among women, as well as the postponement of the transition to motherhood, is often explained by higher aspirations in education, financial independence and security, and the challenges of balancing work and parenthood (Tanturri et al., 2015, p.12). Additionally, the deconstruction of traditional gender roles led by feminism (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021, p.1), along with theories such as post-material values theory, preference theory, rational choice theory, and uncertainty theory (Tanturri et al., 2015, as cited

in Wilak, 2023, p.130), as well as the process of individualization (Peterson, 2015, p.183), contribute to these trends.

The increasing number of women who forgo or postpone motherhood is present even in countries with traditionally lower rates of voluntary childlessness, strong pronatalism, and religion, such as Poland (Wilak, 2023). Recent data from 2023 showed that 42% of currently childless Polish women aged 18-45 either do not plan to have children or are uncertain, compared to results of 22% in 2017 (Wilak, 2023, p.131). Research in different national contexts has revealed various motives and reasons that Wilak (2023, p.134) synthesizes by reviewing previous literature on childfree: "doubts about ability to parent, the lack of a maternal instinct, disinterest in children, dislike of the behavior of children; prioritizing professional life and self-fulfillment, financial freedom without children; overpopulation, or the idea that being childfree will bring more satisfactory partner relationships; concerns about physical health; concern about physical aspects of childbirth and recovery." The motives found in the research on childfree women are consistent with the literature from other national contexts, which could mean they are impacted by globalization (Wilak, 2023, p.139). One motive that stood out in Poland in comparison to other contexts was "difficult experiences from childhood," as well as the fear of prenatal care, which Wilak (2023) connects to the specific health system in Poland, which may be of lower quality compared to those in other countries (Wilak, 2023, p.139).

Interestingly, in my research I also found the fear of obstetric violence in women who could envision themselves as mothers in the future. Another recent research on reasons for childfree choice finds the motive of freedom and time to enjoy hobbies and dedicate to pets, as well as fear of the environmental future (Salgado & Magalhães, 2023, p.5). Interestingly, population and environmental concerns of childfree people can be found in the research from 1987 (Wilak, 2023, p.134), showing not only similarity of reasons, but their persistence in time.

Childfree research has been interested in the decision-making process of childfree women and found the connection between the way these women conceptualize motherhood and their decision to forgo it. Maher and Saugeres (2007, p.18) found that voluntarily childless women visualize mothering as "all-encompassing and potentially overwhelming." Peterson (2017) found, by interviewing childfree women in Sweden, that their perception of gender (in)equality plays an important part in their decision-making. Childfree women believed that despite the two-earner family model, welfare systems, and gender equality policies, the internalized notion that women are the primary caregivers remained dominant and interiorized within the couple (Peterson, 2017, p. 15). This is supported by data showing gender asymmetry in the reduction of working hours and the disproportionate share of childcare responsibilities carried by women in Sweden (Peterson, 2017, p. 15). Settle (2014, p. 29) connects the childfree decision to the perceived "high cost" of motherhood that would negatively affect women, both financially and emotionally. A qualitative research on lesbian women in the UK (Clarke et al., 2018, p.148) found that while childfree lesbian women draw on biological discourse in which they see themselves as "essentially" childfree or "born that way," they conceptualized motherhood through their childhood experience as an inherently patriarchal institution, which they did not want to legitimize. Interestingly, some women in my research who did not forgo the idea of motherhood, like childfree women in Sweden (Peterson, 2017) believed that ultimately there was always a risk that men would not participate enough or equally in the private sphere, despite the equality was their ideal.

There is a variety of different paths of decision-making for childfree women (Donath et. al, 2022). For example, the timing-active deciders" vs. "passive deciders categories developed by Gillespie (2003, p. 125) make a difference between those who actively decide on their childfree status during childhood and the passive ones who ultimately reach that state because of continuous ambivalence. Further, there have been identified categories such as debaters—those

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who are unsure; delayers; and the decliners, who eventually voluntarily decide to give up or those who give up given strong structural constraints (Martin, 2020 as cited in Donath et. al, 2022). Donath et al. (2022) looked closely at the group of debaters and expanded this category. They identified in their national context women that "do not want to want to be a mother but are still debating whether to become a mother" (Donath et al. 2022, p. 8). Their research was insightful in terms of it shedding light on the agency of women in highly pronatalist contexts. The women they research informed them that their inactiveness was positive as it broadened their autonomy and time for reflection, as well as that it lowered the pressure from the outside, given they do not declare non-motherhood or childfree as their firm decision (Donath, et al., 2021, p. 11). It also gave them freedom of imagination of their lives evolving in different directions (Donath, et al., 2021, p. 12). Further, Šumskaitė and Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė (2021, p. 173), in the context of Latvia (Eastern Europe), identify "childfree attitudes" as a critical stance and set of questions posed by childless women of reproductive age regarding the inevitability of motherhood. This informed by research methodologically not to look only to women who have political identification with childfree, but might be debating, and I consider this a contribution to the research in the context of Serbia.

Methodologically, childfree research gives epistemological advantage to women who are childfree, using qualitative methods and allowing women to express their experience, as well as increasing the visibility of this group (Peterson, 2015; Salgado & Magalhães, 2023; Rich, Parlak & Tekin, 2020), given the stigma they face. In many cultures hegemonic femininity has made equivalent the role of motherhood with being a woman (Bugden et al., 2021, p.2) and labels childfree women as "unnatural," "deviant," "childish," "selfish," "hedonistic", "masculine, deprived of their feminine nature" (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021;; Rich et al., 2011; Gillespie, 2003; Peterson, 2015; Colledge & Runacres, 2023). Childfree women often face negative comments from various sources, including family, friends, and the workplace

(Mandujano-Salazar, 2021; Parlak & Teskin, 2020; Rich et al., 2011; Peterson, 2015; Beltrán & Samaranch, 2024). Further, Colledge & Runacres (2023, p. 978) in their research on how millennial mothers react to childfree women found out that though there is an increasing tolerance in comparison to previous generations, childfree women are expected to remain silent and not vocal about their decision, as it makes others uncomfortable and unconformable. Childfree is becoming a highly "contested identity" (Moore, 2014, p. 176), and "childfree persons are linked to elicit greater moral outrage than adults with children" (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016, p.393).

In the Serbian context I have not found data on the childfree women; however, in research conducted by Kričković Pele (2014, p. 68), women who are infertile and undergoing IVF, most of them declared feeling discriminated against in multiple situations (workplace, private life) because of not being able to become mothers. The participants believed the stigma they lived was due to the fact they "are not real mothers," which made them "less worth," which goes to show how in Serbia the dominant and respected aspect of female identity is motherhood (Kričković Pele, 2014, p. 68). Interestingly, at the same time, some of the women in the mentioned research were judgmental towards women who are voluntarily childless, making comments such as: " I think they are making a mistake—children are the biggest joy; they will regret it; it is only acceptable if they are sick." When I think how much I suffer, I judge them." If they can but do not want, then they are selfish." (Kričković Pele, 2014, p. 51). Further, Stevanović (2014, p. 89) in her work on reproductive rights in Serbia argued how women who are childfree are presented in a stereotyped way as lesbians, selfish, and ultimately harmful to society. The point on how motherhood ideology has a social status and capital that obscures women who are not mothers and the non-motherhood as a valid option, can be seen in a comment made by a mother interviewed in a study on the status of mothers in Serbia:

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"In the patriarchal model, the mother is placed on a pedestal; you're now a mother, and that's considered great, blah, blah, blah. I believe that the women who are most endangered are those who are not mothers, because mothers still receive at least some attention." (Sekulić, 2016, p. 126)

Postponement of motherhood has become a trend in the reproductive behavior of women in Serbia (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 29). Although Serbian women tend to become mothers slightly earlier than in most European countries, the average age at first childbirth has increased over time (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 29). According to Eurostat data for 2023, the average age of women at the birth of their first child in Serbia was 28.4 years, compared to the EU average of 29.8 years. This marks a rise from 27.5 years in 2014 (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 29; Sekulić, 2016, p. 114). The increase in the average age at first childbirth is explained, as in other post-socialist countries, by the erosion of the social protection system (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 25; Sekulić, 2016, p. 113). The establishment of a neoliberal regime following the collapse of egalitarian socialist practices—which aimed at collective childcare—led to the "collapse of the reproductive healthcare system, hospital corruption, unemployment, lack of labor protections for mothers, and migration to First World countries for caregiving and domestic work" (Vilenica, 2013, p.18).

Research by Žene u Crnom et al. (2019, p. 58), based on a survey of 1,050 women across the country, shows that the main reasons for not having children are directly connected to the neoliberal regime and its negative effects on social reproduction: "poor health care, financial reasons, and economic, social, and political insecurity in the country." This is consistent with Sekulić's (2016, p. 159) findings, which identify several obstacles to deciding to give birth, including: "low wages and unemployment, working conditions and organization of work in kindergartens and schools, high childcare and schooling costs, difficulty balancing public

(professional) and private (family) life, lack of protection for pregnant women at work, expensive children's equipment, patriarchal values, lack of support for single parents, unresolved housing issues, poor conditions in maternity hospitals, difficult adoption procedures, and limited accessibility of in vitro fertilization."

Since the increased age of childbirth is one of the most significant changes in reproductive behavior, and fertility levels have remained relatively stable over the years, it has been of particular interest—especially to demographers—to understand this trend (Sekulić, 2016, p. 113). They have often argued that women who postpone motherhood are labeled as "selfish," "hedonistic," and individualistic" instead of considering the structural conditions, such as the economic and social situation, that pose obstacles to the transition to motherhood (Sekulić, 2016, p. 113). However, some demographers have connected the postponement of motherhood to the harsh everyday economic situation, as well as changes in relationships between women and men (Veljović, 2015; Rašević, 2018). Veljović (2015) argues that in an economic situation where men are unable to fulfill their traditional roles, relationships become more fluid, and men do not want to commit to serious relationships and live more "hedonistic and consumistic lives", which leads women to postpone having their first child (Veljović, 2015, p. 65). Furthermore, according to her, ultimately the postponement causes a decline in fertility and is a serious problem that also has negative consequences for women's health, as they have children later—for example, after the age of 30—which she emphasizes carries health risks for both women and babies, who may be born with various anomalies (Veljović, 2015, p. 68).

Time and the biological clock is gendered and functions as a form of biopower for women (Yopo Diaz, 2022), by which women are need to structure their lives according to both natural in form of biological clock and social time (Donath et al., 2022). Moreover, some life milestones—such as motherhood—are often prioritized over others; for instance, a career is

frequently seen as an "interference" with reproduction (Yopo Diaz, 2022, p. 774). This perspective can be especially impactful for the millennial generation in Serbia, who highly value professional achievement, making education and career crucial factors in decisions about family formation (Mirić, 2022). At the same time, the transition to the labor market is slow, and the labor market itself is precarious and unstable (Tomanović, Stanojević, and Ljubičić, 2016, pp. 29-36), further complicating women's reproductive choices. In the context of my research, women are highly educated, and their education and professional careers are important not only to ensure survival, but also for self-fulfillment, which influences the timing of motherhood. Therefore, postponement is influenced both by structural factors—which, in the case of Serbia, include constraints related to economic, social, and political stability (Tomanović, Stanojević, and Ljubičić, 2016; Sekulić, 2016; ZUC, 2019)—as well as personal reasons, such as lack of a partner or having prioritized timely to choose educational and career paths that increase the age at which they become mothers (Veljović, 2015; Rašević, 2018). In my analysis, I will propose that postponement of motherhood can be understood as women intentionally prioritizing themselves, their well-being, autonomy, and independence, satisfaction, a part from the lack of the adequate partner (Veljović, 2015; Rašević, 2018) n addition to framing it solely as a result of macro-social and economic factors (Tomanović, Stanojević, and Ljubičić, 2016; Sekulić, 2016; ZUC, 2019).

Motherhood and motivation for motherhood

Motherhood, as well as the motivation for motherhood, cannot be looked at in a vacuum but as linked to broader systems, for example, such as the sex-gender systems (Mandujano-Salazar, 2021, p.2), specific historical, cultural, and economic contexts (Vilenica, 2014, p.9), and the ethnic, racial, and class identity of the woman (Nakano Glenn, 1994).

The binary division of categories—men and women—through hegemonic discourses has assigned them specific roles through hegemonic discourse in which motherhood becomes essential and primary to the personal identity of women (Mandujano Salazar, 2021, p.2). In her work "Social contract of Mothering" (1994) Nekane Glenn shows us how different feminist have worked to undo the idea that women's capacity to reproduce and mother is "universal, natural, and unchanging," (Glen, 1994, p.3). In the context of the US, one of the first was the second-wave feminist Firestone who argued that biological reproduction is at the core of women's subordination and gendered division of labor (Nekano Glen, 1994, p. 22). Further, Nancy Chodorow, in her book "Why Women Mother," combining psychoanalysis and feminist critique, argued that "women's wish to mother is because they were mothered by a woman" (Glen, 1994, p.4). Since mothers allocate most affect, car, nurture, into interpersonal relationships, daughters identify with this; their model of femininity becomes care and nurturance, and they follow it through their lives (Glen, 1994, p.4). Women and men then develop "gender-specific personalities" because of the environment in which they have grown and not because of innate capabilities. (Chodorow, 1978, 50 as cited in Segura and Pierce, 1993, p. 67). However, as women mother it becomes a vicious circle in which these differences appear to be interpreted as "natural."

To contrast this and show the multifaceted motherhood motivations and practices that challenged the universal explanation of the social constructivism of motherhood, Nekane Glen (1994), drawing on Afro-American feminists such as Collins, argues that caretaking of African-American and other minority children is underdone by male and female family members (Glenn, 1994, p.5). On the other hand, research on Chicana families finds Chodorow's frame useful, as the care network for children in their communities is supported by different female figures, such as grandmothers and aunts, who are largely present (Segura and Pierce, 1993, p. 75). They argued that the social context in which mothering occurs, for example, how many

female and male persons are taking care and the type of care activities they are engaging in-is important to understand the specific gender identity formation among different cultures (Segura and Pierce, 1993, p.82). Chodorow's frame can be linked to feminists of family abolition, as the economic context in which women mother is privatized and individualized—since the state is absent from the childrearing, all resources—financial and emotional—are allocated to the child by the parents—in a gender-divided household where the care labor is performed mainly by women/mothers (Weeks, 2021) this creates strong bonds and affects children and partners (Weeks, 2021, p.446).

Since motherhood firstly was framed mostly biased, taking the example of a white middle-class American woman that had the historic weight of domesticity and patriarchy, it did not account for how the motivation for motherhood is connected to the context of survival and community for the historically oppressed racial and minority groups (Nekane Glen, 1994, p. 7). On the other hand, looking at the motherhood's collective and political background, motherhood and women's reproductive capacity can be exploited by nationalist discourses and policies that use women's bodies as the bearers of nation and their sustainers (Drezgić, 2010, p. 968).

Therefore, throughout different feminist epistemological turns have forwarded the discussion and shed light on different conceptualizations of motherhood: motherhood as an ideology, practice, subjectivity of the practice, and affect, many times in opposite terms (Donath, 2015, pp.343-344). Politics of emotion have connected motherhood to "joy, love, distress, helplessness, frustration, hostility, and disappointment, transformation," and only more recently, Donath addressed the regret (Donath, 2015, p. 344). The goal is to further de-essentialize the idea that motherhood has a beneficial effect on all women or that all women assess it as a positive experience, as well as to enable a more critical debate, give visibility to

different experiences, and destigmatize regret not of the child, but of the dominant and oppressive mandate of "good mothering" (Donath, 2015, p. 345).

Colledge and Runacres (2023, p. 969) argue that the choice to remain non-mothers is deeply constrained by gendered ways of thinking that we internalize from an early age within the prevailing gender system. The motivation for motherhood is often driven by the need to conform to gender norms (p. 970). For example, women who choose not to have children are perceived by mothers as stereotypically masculine because they challenge the traditional gender order of "woman = mother = womb" described by Beauvoir (Colledge and Runacres, 2023, p. 947). This biologically-deterministic view makes it difficult for society to recognize or accept women who do not become mothers, seeing them as "masculine" for not conforming with their gender, as being women means being a mother (p. 987).

Further, Maher and Saugeres (2007, p. 14) found out that though childfree women and mothers both have the shared image of the dominant ideal of mothering, childfree women envision it as a more encompassing and overwhelming activity that poses a threat to their identity, whereas women who become mothers envision and then choose it as a "natural progression in life."

How motherhood is considered a natural step in life that confirm gender identity, in research on solo feminist mothers, Holmes (2018, p. 47) found out that women, though they belong to the non-hegemonic motherhood as solo mothers (Larrambebere, 2020), participants framed their motivation and decision to give birth as solo mothers in biological discourse and described their motivation to motherhood as natural and inevitable rather than in terms of agency or choice. Additionally, their decision to pursue solo motherhood was an alternative to the first goal of having normative kinship with a partner, which they could not achieve. This speaks of how the heteronormative family ideal is still dominant in Holmes (2018, p. 47) and how motherhood is not only connected to gender system but also to family.

Motivation for motherhood in Serbia

Since motherhood as ideology and practice is influenced by different historic, cultural and economic context (Vilenica, 2013), I will now proceed to focus on its specific forms in Serbia. In Serbia, the concept of motherhood as an institution and discourse throughout history and centuries has been based on biological determinism in which motherhood is women's natural fate (Višić, 2014, p. 96). Women in socialist former Yugoslavia had to contribute to state socialism by combining work, motherhood, and political activism (Brecewell, 1996, p. 25), whereas during the 90s and the fall of and war in former Yugoslavia, motherhood was politically exploited as a tool for the discourse on the survival and the ethnic purity (Drezgic, 958, p. 2010) of the nation. While the ideal of womanhood during socialist times was of both a worker and mother, during the post-socialist era, womanhood became connected to domesticity and motherhood and patriotism (Bracewell, 1996, p. 25). What we can conclude from this for both periods is that all women would eventually become mothers, as it is part of their adult femininity, with the difference that the first model included other identities and the public sphere, whereas the second one confines women to the private sphere. The idea that "a woman is only fulfilled as a mother" or that "family unity ought to stand above the individual" (Bobić 2010: 144 as cited in Ceriman, 2019, p. 403) is still highly present in Serbian society, even within the highly educated group.

What both ideologies of motherhood have in common is the ideology of its practice—based on sacrifice, where mothers are expected to completely subordinate their own needs to their children (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 49). In this sacrifice system, women have "a nurturing, expressive role, while fathers take on an instrumental role" (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p.49). This division is largely internalized, meaning that neither

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mothers nor fathers express dissatisfaction with it; however it is sometimes contested by women and creates a tension in the relationship (Ceriman, 2019, p. 403). Mothers are expected to nurture and care for children, while fathers take on the role of provider and protector, and this complementary but segregated model extends to gendered expectations for children, with boys socialized for independence, leadership, and public life, while girls are raised to prioritize care, loyalty, and sensibility (Ceriman, 2019, p. 404), creating a vicious circle of gender roles. Therefore, in Serbia care is central to the gender socialization of girls and to their adult self (Ceriman, 2019). Care ethics accompanies them through their whole life (Ceriman, 2019, p. 404). It becomes an ethical duty and a defining trait of women, within both family life and broader social interaction (Ceriman, 2019, p. 404). This is consistent with my findings that I will expose in the first analytical chapter that many women are drawn to motherhood as they feel the need to take care of someone and have a sense of responsibility to give care and not "waste it" the urge, as well as the fact that they take part in the care tasks with their kin's children.

Serbia scores one of the lowest in gender equality index in Europe and women continue to dedicate twice as much time as men to household responsibilities, with a clear gender disparity present throughout the week, including weekends (Šobot, 2022, pp. 70-74). The invisible care work is especially brutal for mothers of young children under six years old spend even more time on unpaid domestic labor compared to others age cohorts (Šobot, 2022, p. 74). On the political level, Serbia, as part of the requirement for EU integration, changed the Law on Gender Equality, while at the same time it promoted it as a threat to traditional family values and national identity (Lončar, p. 2024, p.15). The ruling regime appointed a lesbian woman as prime minister yet did not challenge systemic inequalities (Lončar, 2024, p.15), for example, queer couples cannot legalize their relations and their children.

Motivation for motherhood is high in Serbia, and for women it gives "meaning to their existence" and is a marker of maturity (Tomanović, Stanojevic, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 74) The reasons to have children that the research collected are connected to biological discourse, such as the ideas that the "female body is renewed through pregnancy and that childbirth is necessary for health reasons" (Sekulić, 2016, p. 154); and in the research on women who were undergoing IVF procedures, the motivation was connected to the social expectance for giving birth as well as the gender identity consolidated through biological motherhood (Kričković Pele, 2014, p. 66). The profile of women from Kričković Pele (2014) survey is: average age 32, with secondary education, and married. Motivations for biological motherhood then were the same reasons as those for women who got pregnant without the assistance of ART (Kričković Pele, 2014). The research also found that religion or the high price of motherhood in the period of "the social-economic crisis was not identified as barriers to giving birth for these women" (Kričković Pele, 2014 2014, p. 66). In my research the profile of women is the smiliar age, but they are with university education, therefore I look to understand this group better in terms of their motivations for motherhood.

Given the strong influence of religion and the strong ethno-nationalist and pronatalist discourse (Višić, 2014), since the 90s, research in Serbia has been interested in understanding how it might motivate reproductive behavior. Sekulić (2016, p. 154) found out that some of the reasons women gave about the decision to have children is that it is women's obligation or survival of the Serbian nation, with views such as the nation "dying out" and the notion that it is selfish not to have children, while almost 10 years after, Žene u crnom et al. (2019) show reasons connecting childbirth to national or state concerns are much less emphasized. These are different viewpoints in their research with Serbian women about reproductive and working rights, where the majority of women argue that the decision to have more children should

primarily be "based on their own needs, desires, and interests" (Žene u crnom et al., 2019, p. 63).

Childfree literature on women who choose not to have children has opened the question about choice and domination and the conditions in which women make decisions about motherhood. Bugden et al. (2023, p. 832) argue that social control and pressure women receive about their reproduction disable more complex and open conversation that could not only destabilize the hegemonic motherhood regime, but also facilitate a more informed "motherhood or non-motherhood decision." In her study "The Culture of Giving Birth" Sekulic (2016) shows evidence of how women decide to give birth not because of planning or negotiating but by guiding themselves according to the biological and social clock (Sekulić, 2016, p.119) in which motherhood is converted to a natural, unquestioned path of naturality of "maternal instinct, reproduction, and experience that cannot be explained with words."

Meyers (2001, p. 735) argues, "No choice has such an impact on women's lives as motherhood". However, the question of freedom of choices is complicated, as women are surrounded in a system of matrygyist discourses that, on one hand, glorify motherhood and, on the other, keep its challenges occulted; further, it punishes those who decide to forgo motherhood (Meyers, 2001, p. 762). Though post-feminism argues that women have the ability to choose, however, as Donath et al. (2022, p. 2) point out, the questions women normally ask themselves or that are asked are: "When will I be a mother?," "How many children do I want to have?," and "Do I want a boy or a girl?," but rarely "Do I want to be a mother?" and "If so, why?" is not so common. This happens, as Meyers (2001, 764) argues, because the pronatalist doctrine "saturates women's consciousness," making the option of having children seem like the only imaginable motherhood path.

Finally, as Chodorow asserts (1995, p. 518) in a more nonbinary way, motherhood is an especially interesting place to look at from the point of view of the tension between universal and individual, personal and social, choice/agency and domination; therefore, it is a "slippery" place if we want to surgically precisely draw the line between these two (Chodorow, 1995, p. 518), especially given that the cultural contexts in which the decision is made are different; my research tries to balance this complexity.

A survey of Serbian millennials aged 19-35 found this group desired parenthood in a family (Tomanović, Stanojević, and Ljubičić, 2016). However, it also discovered a slight change in transition to parenthood in Serbia as noted by Tomanović (2017), showing trends of individualization. In the study of 30-year-old Serbian men and women regarding the transition to parenthood, the motivation for becoming a parent, while it is still linked to familism and the fulfillment of gender roles through motherhood and fatherhood, it is also connected to education levels and cultural capital and parenthood becomes less of a central life goal, indicating a trend of detraditionalization in the family and intimate life patterns (Tomanović, p. 2017, p. 7). The frame Tomanović uses to explain the trend of individualization is "reflexive modernity" by Beck (1997), in which individuals do not have to conform anymore to the dictates of tradition and the past, which gives them greater autonomy in choices, for example, when it comes to reproduction (Tomanovic, 2017, p. 5).

In conclusion, I aim to contribute to the discussion about motivation for motherhood for a specific group of women in Serbia-highly educated and urban, in a specific moment in their lives-which is before becoming mothers-in order to understand what the discourse they are drawing most from to explain their motivations. Additionally, I will test their motivation for motherhood. I conclude that while some of them were questioning their motivation towards motherhood, which can indicate more reflexivity, introspection, at the same time, they were

not ready to give up on it, especially within the frame of intimate and romantic relationships. I conclude therefore that motherhood has not lost its appeal for this social group.

Familism

Motherhood and the formation of a (heterosexual) family are central to individuals' intentions and desires and are regarded as key markers of maturity and have high social value (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić 2016; Sekulic, 2016). The family (heterosexual with children) serves as a vital anchor for both men and women, a "society historically marked by chaos, recession, and instability" (Sekulić, 2016, p.117).

I hope to contribute to the discussion on familism as an important aspect of motivation for motherhood by looking at it from the aspect of romantic love and intimacy and affect, as well as using the radical feminist critics of family and feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed to show how women' motivation is co-constructed by different forces within the familism. In her work about queer lives and their relationship to heteronormative social structures, Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 560) shows how our life courses and sexual orientations are oriented. These orientations have the form of "straight lines" that lead to a "good and happy life" praised by the society (p. 554). We are on that path, following the footprint of those who have already started that path before, such as our parents, and while we follow it, we also leave the mark that others will follow (Ahmed, 2006). On that path, what is available is heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction, and the magic is promised at the end of each milestone (Ahmed, 2006, p. 555). Ahmed (2006) by bringing in the vignette from her personal life, stresses the importance of the family in this process of "becoming straight" (p. 555). Similarly, Sekulić (2016, p. 12) discusses how motherhood is portrayed as "sacred, beautiful, and femininity exalted" in order to facilitate an easier rite of passage to motherhood. Daughters learn about the beauty of motherhood from their mothers that portray them as idealized without being open

about the burdens and social reality that make the experience harder (Sekulić, 2016, p. 228). This leaves motherhood as an idealized experience, which often, when women become mothers, has harsh social and emotional effects on them (Sekulić, 2016, p. 228).

Further I aim to contribute by linking familism in my analysis with the idea of romantic couples, which is constructed as an exclusive, self-contained partnership, autonomous and independent from broader social bonds (Weeks, 2021, p. 443). Modern marriage promises security and individual freedom (Weeks, 2021, p. 443). Partner should fulfill the role of sexual companion, co-parent, emotional confidant, and financial supporter (Weeks, 2021, p. 443). My findings show that women are motivated to think about motherhood in terms of a present partner who will fulfill these roles, which is especially attractive in the Serbian context that is highly patriarchal when it comes to private life and sharing childrearing, which can be seen as a form of women protecting their individual self and well-being and awareness about the gender inequality. However, the ideal of the individualized and modern couple who has children can also overburden relationships (Weeks, 2021, p. 446) and especially women (Faircloth, 2019). Faircloth (2019, p.236) argues, building on work of Collins and Illoz that the tension is especially pronounced for so-called egalitarian couples. Despite increased freedom in choosing a partner, social structures still disadvantage women, as they tend to be more family-oriented (Faircloth, 2019, p. 236). Faircloth (2019, p. 236) highlights the gendered nature of "romantic suffering," showing how women are disproportionately affected by the by challenges of balancing love, equality, and parenting are more complex than ever. Meanwhile, as radical feminists such as Weeks (2021) and Lewis (2022) show, the individualization of parenting produces the notion that children are possessions belonging exclusively to their parents (Weeks, 2021, p.443). Within this framework, the isolated nuclear family becomes the primary unit for social reproduction, care, and intimacy, while alternative models such as collective

child-rearing or community-based care structures become unimaginable and this amplifies the motherhood investment, both emotional and financial (Weeks, 2021, p. 446).

In conclusion, by adding to the familism frame, both the radical feminist critique of the economy of family and motherhood (Weeks, 2021), and the angle of romantic love and intimacy of Morris (2019) and Faircloth (2019) within the straight path (Ahmed), I aim to show the complexity of different frames women must negotiate when deliberating motherhood.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

I interviewed 12 women, aged 30-40, and the average age was 31,08, and the most prevalent group was women at the age of 32 going to 33 this year. The youngest person is 30 going to 31 this year and the oldest turned 40 at the time of the interview. They all live in bigger urban cities in Serbia and hold university level education. Two women hold Ph.D. I selected this age group, as we have seen in the literature (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić 2016, Veljović, 2015) it is considered the group age that would be entering motherhood later according to the social time.

I found the participants though snowball sampling and I also used social media to recruit participants. The post on social media contained information about myself, the department, the interview topic, and the publication of the thesis as well as the anonymity of the research. All names in the research are pseudonymized to assure the protection of participants identity. I was not aiming for the highly educated or urban women, but they were the ones that eventually signed up for the participation. Most of the interviews were done online due to preference of some participants, my limited time for research and their limited schedules that did not allow for travel. The interviews varied in length, with the shortest one being half an hour and the longest 2 hours and were done in April 2025, with the exception on one that was done in March 2025 as part of the course on Qualitative Research Methods.

Most of the women were willing to share openly their thoughts and experiences with me and some disclosed that this topic was important for them to vent their frustration and feel that they are not alone in the process of deliberating motherhood. I combined the semi-structured list of questions with phenomenological approach: I had prepared a semi-structured list of question

about where they stand with motherhood, what attracted them to the (non)motherhood path, why, about the obstacles to achieving it, how they felt about it. I offered them to address the topic in their own words in the beginning of the interview, which in most cases was already responding to my prepared questions, but sometimes we needed I redirected the topic. I did that following the Weiss's advice (1994, p. 74) that the participants could bring an interesting and important idea or aspect of the phenomenon that I had not included in my interview plan. Interviews, they were recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed for the purpose of analyzing the data, in which I was looking for common themes and threads. We discussed about whether they want to be mothers, are unsure, do not, what is the reasons behind and it, as well as what are the obstacles in case wanted to be mothers, how the process of debating and negotiating motherhood looked and felt like, whether they faced perceived pressure from the society to conform to the norm or the time pressure.

In my analysis I found that most of them could envision or wanted to become mothers, however each one of them desired it or lived the process of reflecting of it in a very unique way, despite the fact that they gave similar answers about the reasons for becoming mothers, such as conforming to gender identity. Additionally, I discovered that women who want to become mothers and those who are childfree can also share similar fears and doubts that drift them further from motherhood, especially when it comes to loss of freedom and lifestyle. I find these a valuable contribution that should be used to open more a public conversation about (non)motherhood in Serbia and broader by showing how the category of childfree and childless women have in common and how they consider similar aspects when deliberating motherhood.

As I said, my project first became about childfree women, I was aiming to find childfree women in Serbia, however at the end I could just find one that identified firmly as so, therefore because of the lack of time, I had to redirect my research towards a more diverse group and looked at

how my participants relate to and negotiate (non)motherhood in terms. I decided to follow recent research that looks at the topic of non-motherhood beyond the involuntary and voluntary childless distinction and use the umbrella term of non-mothers (Björklund & Rodgers, 2024). This decision has been informed by the fact it cannot be considered a clear-cut distinction, as shown by different research I have found in my literature review and as well in my interviews. Following Donath et al. (2022) more of a post-structuralist approach, non-mothers, then are not a stable or monolithic group or identity, but a unique lense to examine and speak broader to power structures and questions, such as institutions of womanhood and motherhood, heterosexual time and familism. Further, as Šumskaitė argues (2024), women who are postponers and become mothers later, can be already considered a valid identity, especially in the context of motherhood and pronatalist pressure.

Though my participants did not have the identity of non-mothers or childless, and one participant even confronted that term, most of them did feel they felt they had unique positionality in their society and social lives because some were single, and/or without a child. Additionally, though some women disclosed they are feminist or "support womens' rights" they were using quite often the feminist vocabulary such as patriarchy and giving examples of how they are treated differently than men.

My positionality, as an insider- non-mother, age similarity, shared language and culture are part of my ethnographic toolkit (Reyes, 2020) which I believe helped me create a stronger rapport with participants, however it might also pose a limitation to my research in term of bias in the data, as well as my positionality as a researcher from Gender Studies which the participants were aware of.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

SUBCHAPTER 1: Do they want to become mothers and why?

Sociological research from Serbia shows that in the last decade for individuals who have a larger educational and cultural capital, motherhood does not represent the biggest life goal, while the option "It is not important to me at all to have children" is increasing (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 69, in Tomanović, 2017, p. 7). In my research with 12 women who are university degree educated, and living in urban area, my question was: if we depart from the presumption that motherhood is no longer a central goal to this group, how important still it is, does it mean they forgo motherhood, do they reflect or engage with this idea?

Therefore, in this subchapter I will analyze whether women want to become mothers and examine the motivations that lead women-particularly those in their 30s with urban university education and careers- to plan, desire, or consider motherhood as an option in the future.

With the exception of one person, all participants in my study expressed they could envision, with different levels of desire and clarity, becoming mothers in the future, or at least it was an option that they would consider. As Chen (2023, p. 36) argues, one important aspect of the institution of reproduction is the capacity of individuals to picture a future in which they are reproducing themselves. By picturing that they are imagining the good life" (Ahmed, 2006, p.559), that follows the temporality of "birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction" (Jack Halberstam, 2005, p. 152-153, as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 554). Therefore, the path to a good life serves as a starting point and a straight line from which other alternative possibilities may then be explored, but that are not the ones that we imagine first (Ahmed, 2006). Moreover, other possibilities and paths that do not include marriage and reproduction might seem oblique (Ahmed 2006, p. 560).

While the participants' narratives show different reasons, the most prevalent motivation was tied to fulfillment through care, formation, and affective commitment for one's *own* child and it was a promise of a special love and bond. Further, their desire was in most cases imagined within the heteronormative timeline, in which a partner was present. For most of the participants, especially the single women, motherhood envisioning depended on the context, in which the presence of loving partner and a quality relationship was making the picture of motherhood clearer.

Loving, caring, forming, healing

In the interviews, some women explicitly expressed a love for children in general. Many had regular contact with children through their professions or within their families and social circles. Several participants had experience caring for younger siblings, relatives, or neighborhood children, and they viewed their affection for children as a continuation of an interest that began in childhood. For them, having their own child seemed like a natural and logical desire. This is evident in how Anastazija (33) explains one of the many reasons why she wants to become a mother someday:

> "As a child, I played with baby dolls, I loved babies a lot. There were quite a few children in my neighborhood that I practically raised, who were born in 2002 or later, and since I was 9 years old, I've had some baby, so in this sense, babies and children are not foreign to me, and so I love babies, children."

In Anastazija's explanation, she has, what could be understood, a natural affinity for babies and children. A part from that, from an early age, babies and children have always been present in her life. Therefore, she connects it to a sense of familiarity and confidence around this group.

It is interesting to contextualize her affinity for babies and children in the context of Serbia in which parenthood and care for infants has been largely supported by informal and intergenerational networks of care, for example elderly members of family (Bobić &Vesković, 2020, p. 10), but sometime, like in Anastazija's case, by older children, as well as the fact that girls in Serbia are socialized with gendered toys, therefore "babies" and younger children were part of childhood experience for most many girls (Sekulić, 2016, p. 63).

Valerija (31), who is single, speaks about her love for children and how she once considered pursuing a child-related profession but ultimately chose a different career path. She explains that, as a young girl and the sister to her younger brothers, she was often "directed" in her own words, toward caring for children. She took responsibility for her younger brother while their parents were at work, handling a wide range of tasks such as taking him to nursery and school, attending parent-teacher meetings, helping with homework, and accompanying him to doctor's appointments. Even today, she continues to express her love for children by supporting her friends with childcare.

> "I love my godchildren, I don't know if I can say this, like my own children, so I would have liked to have my own child, to be a part of me, to grow up, to learn, to give love, because it is truly a special love, and just as much as they take your hair off your head at some point, there are advantages and disadvantages to everything, but I would like to fulfill myself, to share all my love, tenderness with someone"

For Valerija, motherhood is connected to the feeling of love that goes in both directions and expands, transforming positively both the mother and the child. As we have seen, Valerija gives part of her need to care for and gives love also to her godchildren, which is part of the broader pattern of activities that women who are not mother undertake. Research on non-mothers show that these women often engage in care activities of children of others, whether their family

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members or friends, as well as in voluntarily activities with children, and their motivation for this is often connected to desire to move beyond self-centeredness and embrace a role of care (Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2021, p. 174). Similarly, Silvija (34), who works professionally with children and, like Valerija and Suzana (36), is actively involved in caring for relatives' children, is motivated toward motherhood by her confidence and genuine desire to contribute positively to children's lives. For her, motherhood is not something that is a purpose of her existence, but something that comes from the inner motivation:

> "Motherhood is my own motivation. I think that I am somehow responsible and that I train someone for life, I think that I have a lot to give and I don't need that someone to be an excuse for my existence.. I have to offer is many hours of work and therapy to clean up my transgenerational traumas...standing with two feet on the ground..

As we can see, Silvija stresses that the desire for motherhood is something personal that is not connected to expectations or pressures. In her narrative, she contextualized it as counter to the idea that motherhood is a marker of social maturity (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016). Motherhood for Silvija is connected to the prior transformation of herself that will contribute positively to the child, in the context of society that is marked by structural, transgenerational traumas caused by war, poverty, and emotional repression. Through motherhood, she environs challenging old patterns and creating new patterns in child education, such as overcoming gender segregated patterns, encouraging both boys and girls to freely express themselves and their different emotions, which is different from the traditional and widespread model in which "good boy" and good girl" correspond to the binaries "active/passive", public/private", strong/weak (Ceriman, 2019, p. 408). Motherhood is then an opportunity to shape new models of child education and it does not have to follow the "good" timing for childbirth, but can happen closer to the 50 years of age:

"I think that the first is primarily animal in all of us, animal to evolve, and I could give birth at the age of 45-46, but I have a lot of love to give and receive. I have two nieces who call me mom-aunt, and with them I am very involved in their lives, it would be a shame if I didn't use it, if someone didn't profit from it in some way, I am drawn to it, I think I can dedicate myself to someone."

As we can see, Silvija (34) frames reproduction as not something unique to her, but reproduction as a part of humanity 's inherent characteristic, something natural, as well as a potential of reproduction as a field of love and dedication. She also has a positive outlook at "later" motherhood, as considers that is both biologically possible, and beneficial in the way it gives the mother more time to be well prepares and mature enough. Though she sees reproduction as natural and biological, it is not enough and there has to be a will and personal determination.

Glorija (32), who is queer, does not see herself fit into the bio-kinship (Weeks, 2021). She refuses biological reproduction because of environmental reasons and the "unnecessary impact it has on the body". She is drawn to "parenthood" in her own words, as a way of educating and supporting young people who need it most, such as abandoned children, rather than raising what she calls "a mini-me version". Her motivation both streams from the opportunity to form and provide opportunities for a better life of marginalized persons such as orphan youth:

"The formative time that I would invest in accordance with that individualism and that's the appeal for me..Just when I was thinking about how it would work - you know let out their anger and heal the trauma or at least ease it a little…someone, who had a similar life to me or a worse life than me, to live it better."

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As we can see, from her example parenthood is a place of healing and social integration and it does not have to move with binaries of mother/father, but more as a relationship between an adult person who can accompany and support a younger person who is in need. Interestingly, Glorija (32) draws from the pronatalist discourse and positions it within her environmentalist and animal right discourse. She claims that though Serbia has a low fertility rate and that it would be good to raise fertility within the Balkan peninsula, looking from the broader and global perspective, raising fertility rates is damaging to the environment and animal life. For her, in a more Haraway's "non-natalism" (Mattheis, 2022 p.515) fashion, motherhood is not only a biological reproduction and individual activity but a collective responsibility without necessarily having blood ties:"We are all social beings and if we all take turns," in words of Glorija means that not all have persons have to reproduce, but should take collective responsibility for children.

Differently to this perspective, Dijana (37) and some other participants frame motherhood as a project of reproduction, and investment, where emotional, material, and personal resources are directed entirely toward the child. Drawing on radical feminists, this is does not have to be a coincides-according to Weeks (2021, p. 443), given the political economy of reproductive labor-the care work surrounding children is primarily a private responsibility of individuals, especially mothers, in the absence of state support within the capitalist system. Under such circumstances, the entire process of raising a child requires parents to invest enormous amounts of material resources, affection and emotion, creating strong emotional bonds and conceptualizing children as our own "properties" (Weeks, 2021, p. 443). "I really like that idea of having someone who is just yours and that you created, and that everything goes towards him or her", she expressed. As well the words of Katarina (40): "I would love to feel how something is growing and going out of my body, and it is mine, something that is personally mine".

Motherhood, then, entails having somebody who belongs to the mother, and in which mother is the central point from which all the resources go to the child. In the context of Serbian with high esteem for self-sacrifice for children, this model is highly accepted by most mothers and fathers, as well, though with different roles, where the absolute priority in resource goes to children even after the childhood period (Ceriman, 2019, p. 403).

Given that many of the women in this study are involved with children or have, at some point in their professional lives, worked with children, as well as the fact they have contact with children through their friends, it was interesting to try to understand whether this kind of contact with children, young persons, care work, could serve as a sort of compensation or for the role of motherhood, which could ultimately lead women to reconsider or give up on motherhood. While contact with children and care work both professionally and through kin networks provides joy and gratification for my participants, it does not suffice to satisfy the need for care and love that arises from the role of motherhood, as Gloria (32) expresses: "On some collective level, yes, but it's not that individual satisfaction of developing someone as an individual, accompanying them through life, in accordance with your possibilities, love".

Though there is fulfillment on a collective and professional level due to the nature of her work, childcaring of one's own child is a specifically gratifying activity in terms of having the possibility to give love and formation on one's own terms. Sophie Lewes (2022, p. 132) in her book on "Abolition of Family" argues that there is a universal need in every individual for intense mutual care, interdependency, however that we have limited tools at our disposal to satisfy that need. In our societies those needs, such as love, understanding, care is fulfilled mostly or at least expected to be fulfilled within a blood-tied family (Lewis, 2022, p. 132). Combined with the (gendered) privatization of care, our interest and emotional investment and

affect we feel in other people's children cannot be compared to that in our own children (Weeks, 2021, 443).

Izabela (32) shared that she had never experienced a maternal instinct, unlike most women around her who had always known without hesitation that they wanted children and planned accordingly. However, she recently experienced a shift-a desire that made her consider she might be ready to "give up her selfishness" by dedicating it to someone of her own: "A desire woke up in me, a desire to take care of someone, to have a little best friend whom I will raise, from whom I will make a man, and then that's all-it's still some kind of fantasy." Izabela's frame her motivation to motherhood in the wake of a desire that came from nowhere or that might be according to her, related to externalized and internalized pressure of the "society that talks about children and motherhood all the time". Motherhood is connected to care, and she imagines motherhood as a meaningful and unique relationship with another human being, where the bond between mother and child epitomizes this connection (Boucai & Karniol, 2008, p. 853), envisioning her child as her best friend. At the same time, her remark on the being willing to give up on "her selfishness" as a moment she spotted when reflecting on motherhood, could suggest how the idea of women focusing on oneself is framed as negative. Selfishness means giving out to the other or the collective, and in this case, her imagined future child (Downing, 2019, p. 2).

Children as future caretakers and intergenerational bond:

Anastazija (33) stood apart in her discourse expressing her motivation for motherhood-not just in terms of love for children and intergenerational connection, that will "make her younger" as the children would have different experiences, but as well a strategy to ensure future care and support once she gets older. She described having children as a form of investment in the future:

> "I remember my mother and my grandmother and no one else.. you stay only in the memories of your children... and somehow, I feel like that semi-selfish moment, and another which it's also selfish, but simply Eastern cultures are such that they simply give birth to children because society is insecure. I think who will care about you in your old age. I mean, there is violence against the elderly."

By describing this reason as selfish ones we see the tension between two competing discourses that some women might encounter: first the pragmatic, that is labeled as selfish, especially for women, where having children is a potential survival strategy due to the structural marginalization of older people. Her argument resonates the fear and the lack of deterioration of the social reproduction system in Serbia, where elderly care is still undertaken in informal networks by family members rather than institutional or state-supported structures (Pantović et al., 2024). Fatherhood is Serbia is often driven for men with desire to continue the family, as the leaders (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 67), whereas in this case motherhood could be understood more as a remembrance against oblivion.

Cherry on the top of the cake

Women are exposed to the dominant discourse of motherhood as the ultimate happiness and that a woman cannot be fully happy if she is not a mother (Sekulić, 2016, p.139cite). How dominant it is the fact that some of the women during interviews brought up that pursing motherhood is "not purpose of my life"or that "I would still be able to be happy without children". However, these women did not forgo desiring motherhood in the future. As Šumskaitė (2024, p. 98) argues, non-motherhood still does not "holds a path that promises happiness", therefore it is hard for women to give up on this and imagine and pursue an alternative path that would not include motherhood. Albina (32), who is married describes how she hypothetically envisions non-motherhood life: "When I imagine my life without children,

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is like, it is like now, but after a time it becomes kind of boring, there is nothing exciting." As we can see, there is a fear of stagnation and missing out if she pursued a childfree life. At the same time, reflecting and deciding on motherhood for Albina (32) is a process that is giving her anxiety. She discloses the fear of regretting the decision to become a mother, not liking the role and not being able to adapt to it, as well as that she might miss her "previous old life". As we can see for Albina, motherhood is something that changes identity and she is familiar with the discourse of the regret of the role and not the child (Donath, 2015). Married women had a very strong sense of the children being the "final" destination in their lives, the happy ending (Šumskaitė 2024), though they were happy with their lives the way they are. However, having children with a loving partner would add something more, an added value to their lives, as we can see in the discourse of Anastazija (33): "I would be doing the same as now, doing what I love and dedicating myself to my career, but children would be like cherries on the top of the cake". She imagines herself as both a mother and working/career women, as all the rest women in my research who value their professions and work. She brings out that she does not imagine herself as only a mother. Unlike childfree women who often imagine motherhood more in terms of identity that practice (Maher and Saugeres, 2007), for Anastazija it is possible to have both identities- motherhood would represent a distinct satisfaction and aspect of her life and identity, not the only one. Izabela (32) on the other hand was reflexive about the discourse of the happiness that she hears often with phrases like: "yes, it will be like that- "you will never feel love like when you have your child." She is hesitant to think that motherhood is the way for her to fully reach the happiness, while important people from her life offer the idea:

> "My mother herself says when she was young and childless that she was very selfish regarding her feelings, her time, how she spends it, everything. But then she says "when I saw you, everything changed. I really have never felt the love I felt with you". I consider her very reasonable, as someone who doesn't put emotions first and so to speak, she said it truly and

actually, and she experienced it that way and that's how it was for her. And then like ahem, then maybe it will be the same for me. But you don't know. Because I can only rely on the stories and opinions of the people around me who I know love and support me and want the best for me."

Following the idea of happiness and its connection to motherhood, Sara Ahmed (as cited in Carbayo-Abengózar, 2024, p. 209) argues, women's happiness is "an expression of collective wish and desire" and daughters have the duty to reproduce the form of the family, which means taking up the cause of parental happiness as her own. In Serbian culture not only motherhood, but also grandparenthood has a great social value (Bobić, Vesković, 2020). Though not expressing explicitly their parents as the motivation for motherhood, Izabela's discourses revealed how her parents' wishes for reproduction have influenced the aspirations.

Partner

In women's narratives, a partner is almost always part of the story when envisioning motherhood. This reflects what Jack Halbstam (2007, p.181). coined as the hetero reproductive temporality of birth, marriage, and reproduction. However, the heterosexual temporality should be situated in the broader discussion about romance, love and intimacy. As Morris (2019) in her article on heterosexual solo mothers gives a review on how the "script" of promise of enduring and romantic love and relationship still holds an important place in people's life. The idea that love is a "central source of meaning in people's lives" is still present, and we pose our hopes and standards high regarding relationships that have to be "deep and with deep emotional bond" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim as cited in Morris, 2019, p. 264). Also, romantic and sexualized couples are still striving ideal for forming a family life, and overall, a good life (Morris, 2019, p. 265). Therefore, finding a partner does not include just following a temporality but looking for "intense, enduring love partnership, in a hope for a couple-based

family life" (Morris, 2019, p. 281). In the narratives, then, becoming a mother and having a child is a result not of duty, obligation, social pressure but love, intimacy. (Faircloth, 2019, p.237). For Dijana (37), who is single, and Suzana (36), who is in a situationship, it is unimaginable to picture her raising a child on her own without a partner and they were disappointed in not already having a family. It would not be the full picture and the full project that promises emotionally solid relationship between people who live in unity of ideas and goals:

> "They say things like 'you should have a child for yourself, to be a solo mother,' but I cannot do that. I've always wanted a family — mom, dad, and kids. I don't know if that is selfish or not... I respect women who can do it, but it doesn't feel right for me. I'm ashamed to say it, but I have an impression that a child would only be the result of a harmonious relationship where two people found each other, same thoughts, matches, not ideal, but to function well, to push." (Dijana, 37).

> "I was hoping that by before the age of 30 I would already be married and having children" (Suzana, 36)

As we can see, it feels selfish for "wanting it all" the full picture, however she does not want to settle for the solo motherhood. Motherhood for her has to be situated in an intimate, quality relationship and two parent familiar context. Other single women who were a bit younger discussed how they were facing pressure from family to settle down, focus more on finding a partner and giving them a grandchild. Valerija (31), as we have seen loves children, ideally sees herself becoming a mother in a relationship based on communication, intimacy and a "sense of equality" (Faircloth, 2019, p. 237), even without the promise of the "ever happy ending (Morris, 2019, p.261"):

"That the child would be made of love, and both parents equally involved would go through life together. It's ok for me to break up with my partner tomorrow, get a divorce, disappear from the face of the earth or whatever, and leave the child, but it will be my love, my desire, my will, so you lead that child on the right path. This way, so that your child doesn't feel pressure, and doesn't do something because it was time to do it."

The child has therefore to be born out of authentic love and has to be desired and not be a result of social control and pressure. Interestingly, many single women were describing their ideal of relationship as authentic, and not instrumental, counter to the "Serbian history of arranged marriages" (Silvija, 34), additionally some of them who were single were disappointed how it was difficult to find someone who would like to commit, and that relationships are becoming very superficial, which is similar to findings of Veljović (2015).

Jasmina (32), who loves and works with children professionally and considers that "maternal love must be "this beautiful crazy love", fantasized about having children when she was a younger girl. Nowadays she thinks differently and asks herself if motherhood would be really something she desires and is preparing herself for different scenarios in life. For her motherhood could be considered as an option in case she finds a partner and they mutually agreed on having a child:

"I have a need to meet someone, but as far as children and creating a family are concerned, I'm not in the mood to have a child at any cost.. I would like to find a life partner with whom I could simply have the stability and security. And if it happens that the partner and I both want to start a family, I would be open to that, but I don't personally consider myself late in anything and somehow, I really consider myself a lucky person because I am independent, do what I love and what fulfills me"."

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For her as for Valerija, the child must be a personal decision that the partners mutually make. Similarly, as other single women, the focus in their discourse is not that focused on marriage, but on stability, security, dialogue, consensus, togetherness. Tamara (30), reflects on how it is nice to "have a mini-me" and unlike some of her friends who are already strategizing how to become mothers through different means, she disclosed that she is reflecting, and open to the possibility of "unbeaten paths", however, in the event of a satisfactory relationship in which both partners share the good and the bad about parenting, the possibility for motherhood is open:

> "If I have a quality relationship-even if it doesn't last my whole life, because there are no guarantees-I would definitely want to bring a child into the world, knowing that this child has two parents, not just me. It's not only about sharing love but also sharing challenges."

Therefore, the decision to have a child is driven solely by the quality of the relationship, that is based on respect for individuality, the partner, freedom, and stability over relationships driven by social expectations or obligations (Morris, 2019). Many of them I mentioned, contrasted their ideal of motherhood and family life with the examples they give from their surroundings:

> "I know a person who has a child-married early because wanted a child, but not unhappy in the marriage. The child is loved nut they are dissatisfied with the relationship. I wouldn't want to burden myself with that. It's easier for me to deal with loneliness than to be with someone who restricts me, makes me unhappy, and with whom I can't have a good relationship." (Jasmina, 32, single).

Similarly, Valerija (31) reflected on the inner and external pressures around completing milestones such as motherhood, especially those over the age of 30:

"She was desperate to have a child, so she got it with the first partner she found, but he doesn't pay attention to her or the child. I don't like to interfere in others' intimacy, but I think she stays with him mainly because of the support she receives from his family for the child"...

Both of those examples are within the heteronormative framework; however, it is not enough- it must have the qualities of happiness, attentiveness, and lacks instrumentalization of relationship for purpose of having a child. Katarina (40), who is the oldest among the participants, expressed that she does not give up the possibility of being a mother, and that she would be happy to be a stepmother too, if the relationship has quality, despite the fact that the society does not see this as desirable.

For women who were married, children were seen as a way of bonding and strengthening the relationship with the partner (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 68), as we can from Anastazija's (33) quote:"My husband and I will stay with some person together, that will connect you". Children in this way transform the relationship of the parents, bringing a special connection to the couple. Albina (32) fantasized about motherhood during her 20s with some of the boyfriends and now, married, she expresses how though ambivalent, the "child's" side is gaining against the childless side, as she has the curiosity of the curiosity of who the child would resemble the personality". Her quote shows how motherhood is connected to Ahmed's (2006, p.559) in which bodies are oriented toward reproduction, continuity, inheritance, and reproduction of family tree, with the promise of the return in which children will continue the same path.

Interestingly, for the childfree woman, the presence of a partner played an important role in their decision-making, as well. Drazena (36) shared that with a previous long-term partner, she felt "shaken" in her decision to be childfree, as he was unwilling to compromise on his desire for fatherhood. However, she eventually found a partner who also prefers to remain childfree.

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Ultimately, only one woman did not cite a partner as a motivation regarding motherhood; she was prepared to become a mother independently but expressed disappointment that her pursuit of solo adoptive motherhood might reduce her chances of finding a suitable partner.

Why not to be a mother

In my research, the only person who identified as childfree, as someone who voluntarily and unequivocally does not want to have children, belongs to the group of childfree women who do not reject children, but rather the role of motherhood (Peterson, 2015). She always felt that she was never attracted to motherhood and it took her time to comes in terms that this would not change and that there was something "wrong with her". The participant disclosed that she has a positive relation to the children of her friends because she likes their parents. Children are seen as extension to the adults, similarly as in research on childcare that childless women preform for other people's children (Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, 2021). Further, my childfree participant expressed that she would be open to help occasionally in childcare activities if asked by the parents, though she would find it a "tiring activity". Her lack of motivation for motherhood is due to perception of childcare as hard work and responsibility (Salgado & Magalhães, 2023), which would compromise her sense of peace and freedom (Peterson, 2015) that she cherishes and prioritizes:

> "I see that there is a lot of love, but I see that there is a lot, a lot of work, a lot of care. And I think that I am not ready for that, I like to do what needs to be done, to have my free time. And for me, it is unimaginable now, I am constantly on the go, when I imagine that I would no longer be able to do that, when I imagine that the first thing in the morning when I wake up is someone else's need, like no, nothing in the world."

Drazena (36) associates motherhood with experiences of love and positive emotional fulfillment, coupled with the responsibility of caregiving-motives that were expressed by

women who desire motherhood. This is consistent with the research on Maher and Saugeres (2007, p. 14), that childfree women and mothers share similar" dominant ideals of good mothering", but what makes them different is that ultimately childfree women see mothering much more "overwhelming and all-encompassing" .Drazena then sees her lifestyle as incompatible with the demands of intensive caregiving-prioritizing autonomy and freedom. She is not concerned about how motherhood would affect her negatively. Additionally, she articulates a perceived lack of inherent "caring" qualities, suggesting that the maternal caregiving quality was no transmitted naturally to her, which makes her unsuitable for motherhood.

Conclusion Subchapter 1:

In this subchapter I analyzed whether women want to become mothers and why, as well as if this is an easy, unhesitant desire and decision. The narratives of women show what draws them to motherhood is the conceptualization of motherhood as a place that becomes a personal, individualized project in which an intense care, love and commitment is given to forming a new person a child, which aligns with the findings of the previous research of Kričković-Pele (2014), showing motivation is still influenced heavily by gender identity (Kričković-Pele, 2014, Tomanović, 2017) that in the specific motherhood and gender identity context in Serbia is connected to the ethics of care and sacrifice of women for others (Ceriman, 2019). I have also found out that instead of motherhood being a project in which one invests in each other by forming a new person, teaching, it is also a way to one's own growth by being in contact and close relationships with a new generation, therefore is connected to oneself too. In the modern nuclear family in which all resources go to one's own child affects our (im)possibility of imagining other ways of childrearing or caregiving other than individualized and privatized in nuclear family (Weeks, 2021, p. 443), however some of the women helped also in the

childrearing of their kin's or friend's children. Though many children benefit of their care, as most of them have contact with children and participate in the larger chains of social reproduction though their work or private lives (Ceriman, 2019), having one's *own* child is seen as realm in which they could put in practice the care, love and upbringing on their own term. Further, some participants saw their knowledge and hard work would be a well-used way of contributing to the child and making them fit for the role and combined with their identity as working women. In a way all their hard work and education of the future mother would not be "wasted" and materialize through the role of motherhood. Most felt confident about their future role, as they would be able to perform it correctly, given their experience and love for children, while some like Albina felt they needed to learn more about it, as she "does not know yet how to hold the baby" before going the motherhood path.

The affect connected to motherhood was mainly of love and happiness, sometimes verbalized as "impossible to verbalize that kind of love", similar to what Sekulić calls the "unspeakable language of motherhood, however one of the participants also expressed fear of regret as well. In some studies, about motivation on motherhood, rather drawing from the post-feminist "choice" explanation, women used the motive of biology (maternal instinct, maternal desire) to make sense of their decision, which shows that there is still no social pressure to explain the motivation for motherhood, and that the biological discourses reinforce and "naturalize" further the relationship between being a mother and a woman (Holmes, 2018, p.47). Interestingly, most of my participants did not use this frame, however one participant did feel the sudden desire that came suddenly and "out of nowhere", as it was the first time she felt it, as well as Suzana (36) for whom the decision to be childfree was not normal. At the same time, the childfree woman made sense of her decision to be childfree in "born this way" fashion (Clarke et. al, 2018), as well saying "I think I must belong to these 6% of women that do not have the innate maternal instinct". Most of the time motherhood was framed as their will, desire and choice

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(ZUC, 2019). The desire was an important concept, for example one of the participants Izabela (32) though she felt the desire, wanted to make sure it was her authentic desire and not the result of the pressure of others. Though some of them recurred to the famous phrase "realize myself as a mother" (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016, p. 69), motherhood was expected to be only one facet of their identity and not all-encompassing, as they were foreseeing balancing it with their careers. One of the participants, even directly challenged the idea of "woman-mother-queen" which in Serbia represents the motherhood model of domesticity.

Most of the participants were motivated to think about motherhood in the heteronormative temporality (Halbstam, 2007)-and as a result of a "pure relationship based on "commitment, love, communication, intimacy and a sense of equality" (Morris, 2019) where the child is a result of love and desire by parents. For already many married women, becoming a mother was seen as a special addition to their lives, something that could bring a distinct joy to their life and relationship, children that resemble their parents, and are a symbol of the relationship. This was viewed as a foundation for a happy family life and life without them would look the same but less exciting. Only one woman was different and imagined the possibility of being a single adoptive mother, however that was not her preferred choice, and she had to negotiate her perception that the solo motherhood would decrease her chances for finding a partner that would accept to be with her and the adoptive child.

As to the political aspect of motherhood, one participant, Glorija (32) viewed queer adoptive parenthood as a missed opportunity by the state to enable queer community to contribute to society by helping those in need, and at the same time create a sense of the queer community of belonging to the majority. At the same time, the adoption option was driven by environmentalist ideas about overpopulation and the fact that strong emotional bonds can be achieved not only through-bio-genetic kin (Weeks, 2021).

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While love, performing care, forming, educating, healing one's child, focused on the other, giving someone a better future than they had is viewed as a motivating force, for childfree woman care and loss of time autonomy and freedom was the main decentive and claimed it did not compensate for the amount of hard work and responsibility. In her research on infertile women undergoing IVF, Kričković-Pele (2014) provides evidence that the motivation to have children is similar for both infertile and fertile women. While some childfree cite environmentalist issues as reason, one participant expressed a desire to become an adoptive parent specifically because of worries about overpopulation and a reluctance to put her body to the physical demands and invasiveness of pregnancy, that she considers unnecessary.

Many women expressed multiple reasons simultaneously and did not view motherhood as their primary life goal (Tomanović, 2017), except for Suzana (36) who expressed that "it really is the purpose of life" and some of them even said that they could be happy even without it. It then becomes a possible option that they could envision in the future, but not necessarily, as it depended on the context. The context normally means the presence of a partner who is adequate for the role of partner and father.

Even if see it is an option, reproduction or adoption remains a frequent consideration, even if they were uncertain that it would ultimately happen. For example, Tamara (30) was informing herself on the option for freezing her eggs as a precaution, Valerija (31) mentioned she might adopt if she did not become a mother by age 35–40 because she did not find a partner. Katarina (40), who is single, was thrilled to think of becoming a stepmother if she were to enter a relationship with a partner who already had a child and love the same as she would love her children because they would be her partner's. At the same time, some women were going through very introspective process: Albina (32) experienced anxiety, worrying that she might eventually regret becoming a mother or find that she did not like the role, and she felt the inner

pressure of time, however she was postponing it. Izabela (32), felt the inner pressure of biological clock as well as the outer pressure of the society that talks about the "biological clock" and general expectations surrounding motherhood. However, she wanted more time to reflect and be sure that her sudden desire to become a mother was hers. Jasmina (32) was preparing her for all scenarios and was looking on in internet to read and learn more about women who remained single and without children, in order to understand more how this life looks like, as she was preparing herself for the possibility of not finding a partner. She was then looking for references that she could not easily find in her everyday life. At the same time, given the pressure facing her family and some friends, she started being introspective about whether motherhood is something she really desires and felt alone in this process. On the other hand, there were women such as Valerija (31), Katarina (40) who did not feel the pressure of time and were letting it flow, leaving motherhood to will of God (Yopo Diaz, 2020, p.189) if it happens-it happens, if not OK", which show how women perceive both biological and social time differently and uniquely despite their difference in age (Yopo Diaz, 2020, p. 188).

I conclude that certain aspects of motherhood remain deeply embedded in more traditional motivations- as it continues to be closely tied to gender identity and is ideally envisioned within a heteronormative temporality, which aligns with the previous research both internationally and nationally that I reviewed in the previous chapter. However, the discourse they offer is often not in biological or nature terms and it defies the discourse that it is the meaning of life and happiness, though at the same time it uses a strong discourse on special love and happiness. What I have found is one in which motherhood is situated within a "pure relationship characterized by commitment, love, and equality" (Morris, 2019), that single women expressed it is hard to find nowadays in Serbia, which goes with findings of Veljović (2015) and Rasević (2018) about the centrality of a partner in delaying motherhood. While motherhood may not be the primary goal for this group of highly educated women (Tomanović, 2017), I argue it still

does have an extremely significant meaning, reflected in the frequency and depth of their reflections on the topic (Šumskaitė, 2024). On the other hand, given the context of Serbia with high value for familism and pronatalism, I argue some women showed also introspection (Donath et. Al, 2022), as women question whether their maternal desires are genuinely their own or shaped by social pressures, as well as what could be argued as "childfree attitudes" (Šumskaitė, 2021).

SUBCHAPTER 2: Why haven't they become mothers (yet)?

In the first subchapter I identified what could be identified process of introspection, reflexivity and critical thinking about motherhood in some participants, as some questioned whether their maternal desires are truly their own or influenced by social expectations and pressure, as they lived in a culture that praises motherhood. One participant expressed fears of regretting motherhood or not embracing the role fully, which could be an indicator of how non-hegemonic discourses about motherhood, such as motherhood ambivalence and regret (Donath, 2015), could be gaining presence. However, for all women in the research, except for the childfree participant, was difficult to envision lives that did not include motherhood. For most, the vision of the presence of a partner was drawing them to motherhood. Only one participant was ready to pursue it without a partner, but this was not her primary plan. Additionally, some insisted that it was their desire and decision positioning themselves counter and subversive to those that considered getting married and having children only because "it was time, so it should be done", which they considered very common in the Serbian society.

Most of them, with the exception of Izabela (32), Albina (32) and Suzana (36), were not feeling constrained by time and considered they had enough time to become mothers-in fact, they considered that more time would prepare them better for the role. For example, Glorija (32) considered how in some years she would gain more experience working with children who are

marginalized that would prepare her for adoption, if "law changes". They were challenging the "good timing" and risks of later motherhood discourse (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016), in fact they many of them considered that though the biological clock is natural, it is also socially constructed to control more women, instead of facilitating women to become biological mothers later. Others, like Valerija (32) and Jasmina (32) asserted that they were the ones that prioritized their education and professional life, and they always knew the early motherhood was not for them.

If we consider that in Serbia the dominant discourse on motherhood includes the discourse of the "risk of the later motherhood" and familism (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016), these women were transgressing social norms-those who are married or cohabiting did not become mothers immediately after starting their couple life, and those who are single were not coupled yet. Though I will not focus in this research on the pressure, almost all of the both single and married women reported comments and pressures they faced especially from their families.

In the next part I will look at the reason why these women have not become mothers (yet) to contribute to the debate about the postponement of childbirth. I argue that women demonstrate awareness of the risks involved in the transition to motherhood, especially within the current specific neoliberal and patriarchal regimes in Serbia-therefore, they were not only concerned about how it would affect the future child, but also about the impact on their own well-being, bodies, autonomy, satisfaction.

<u>Unsafe and unequal society</u>

On one hand, as Vilenica argues (p. 2013, p. 18) women in Serbia live a neoliberal capitalist motherhood regime in which healthcare and social welfare services are constantly being reduced, conditions in hospitals are worsening, while access to better services becomes possible only for the upper class, the dismissal of pregnant women from work, the region's

lowest child allowances, unequal maternity pay across regions and an extremely low social worker-to-client ratio, racism towards Roma mothers and homophobia. At the same time, they live in a patriarchal regime-Serbia ranks among countries with lower levels of gender equality in whole Europe (Šobot, 2022). In particular, Serbia lags far behind countries like Sweden and Denmark in gender equality related to time use, especially regarding leisure and participation in activities outside the family, while the gap is smaller in household care responsibilities, however it falls mainly on women (Šobot, 2022, 74). As we can see, in this regime women are punished brutally, it makes them time-poor and by not having time for themselves, overburdened (Šobot, 2022).

While in the past, when they were children themselves, motherhood were seen as a "stabilizing force in the chaotic society that provided parents with a sense of purpose amid uncertainty" (Sekulić, 2016, p.117), the focus now for these women is on how children would be vulnerable to the instability, corruption, unsafety of their environment, as well the to the mother personally. Some of the women not only have spoken of their own financially unstable situation, with no stable earning, but the broader contexts of a country in which they do not feel safe, that creates social and political marginalized groups, and in which it is a risk to give birth and be a mother. Participants who were married or cohabiting, as well as Silvija (34) who aims for solo adoption, were particularly contextualizing their postponement due to structural difficulties. Anastazija (33) positions her decision to delay in contrast to her parents' decision to bring a child in a time of big political and economic crisis which she found "irresponsible" both for the parents and the child. By delaying motherhood, she not only looks to protect her future child, but also herself:

> "I don't want to do that to myself—I don't want to raise a child in stress, and I truly believe there is time. That saying, 'the older, the harder,' simply isn't true. "You feel unsafe in a

society, living in fear for yourself and your child—whether they go to school and someone

harms them, whether a shelter collapses on them"

The last sentence should be contextualized within the recent episode in Serbian history in which a shelter of train station collapsed in November 2024 and killed 16 people, triggering massive anti-corruption protests in large part of the society, which was mentioned by some of other participants as well. Therefore, the decision to have children in this context triggers thinking about the risks. Anastazija considers that it is worse for a woman to force and pressure herself to do something that she is not fully ready for because of the conditions, as eventually it would turn against her. She than, similarly to other women who were married and cohabiting, was taking the transition to motherhood as something to be thought about and planned well, which goes with the findings of Tomanović (2017) about the individualization process of the transition to parenthood that has changed from unplanned and marked by social timing (Sekulić, 2016) to a highly reflexive process. The focus on themselves and their well-being is further expressed by several participants who feared obstetric violence and dehumanizing treatment within the healthcare system. Some participants were afraid of how pregnancy and post-partum would affect their bodies, but also mental health. Those fears were triggered even more by the health system they perceived as dehumanizing, and many women were therefore waiting to have more economic stability of incomes to have the option of going to the private hospital. As Tamara (30) remarked:

" I have a few friends who are pregnant, and they are going to private clinics and they have positive experience, which gives me hope. But yes, God forbids you get pregnant if you do not have money"

As we can see there is an overall dissatisfaction with the health system and many women in the research found the possible strategy in securing money for the future that would enable

them a more secure and human pregnancy. Silvija (34) who reports how despite being an educated woman with diploma, she could not find a stable and secure job because of the corruption in the public sector, causing her to be in a precarious social position. She did not fear her body, as she believed nature was by her side. She was frustrated about the fact that she could not "afford to become a mother" due to the increasing class inequality:

> "When I thought about all those tests - it was really stressful for me. I don't have money for these tests; I don't have money to be a mother. If you're over 30, you're forced to do everything. I think more about the prejudices of the medical staff than about the birth itself. For example, I'm afraid of being alone in the delivery room with strangers - that's always scared me, especially with what's happening in Serbia"

In the neoliberal gender regime in which the health system underfunded and in which they perceive there is discrimination and corruption in the public sector, many must find their own way and turn into private clinics, which creates inequality among women as only those who are more economically privileged can afford themselves the basic medical services. Izabela (32) expressed fear from both her body and the healthcare system complications during childbirth and feels anxious hearing conflicting stories.

> "I'm not someone who likes to focus too much on the negative side of things because I think it would put me in a bad mental state, cos then I would just want to move to Norway to give birth there, because here, it's not all sanitary. You hear some say everything's great, others say the midwives are and nurses are a catastrophe..complications during childbirth; it scares me a lot."

Glorija (32) who would like to adopt a child reflected on the legal and social obstacles queer people face in Serbia when trying form a family. Without legal family rights, and amidst social and political inequalities that are becoming more and more visible, she conceptualized parenthood in the realms of fantasy:

"If my partner and I can't legally be partners, share health insurance, how can I even think about family? If laws magically changes. But that path is so complicated. You know, with the current politics and climate in Serbia... The police got buildings and apartments, and I'm like, okay, at least give us the chance to live somewhere at half price."

For Glorija (32) and for Albina (32) the question of the housing was an important factor that needed to be fulfilled before they could take a step into transitioning to motherhood, however their emotions were of frustration, pessimism and sense of unfairness, as they could not see when this could actually change and were left in the state of waiting.

As we have seen, especially for the married or cohabiting women or the woman who was considering going for the solo adoption, they perceived the structural problems that made them leave their decision for later in wait for better conditions. What they perceived as a problem was the lack of a strong system of social reproduction (Sekulić, 2016) that not only is weak, but is dehumanizing and corrupt. However, the solutions they could envision, and provision, were securing their economic and material situation that for many would allow them to turn to private health care in case of need. They did not want the state to pay them for having a child when is born, but to first secure better social conditions, such as schools and hospitals or what Silvija (34) said: "I am an extremely capable and strong woman; I do not want the state to pay anything to me and then take it as a favor of they are making to me. I want you to enable my child to go to school".

Patriarchal private sphere regime

The prevailing model of family life and parenthood is the modified male breadwinner system: both men and women are expected to have full-time jobs, however women disproportionately handle the private sphere duties (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016). The experiences, reflections and narratives shared by women in this context give an added layer to the question

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of the heteronormative temporality. If for most of the single women, the partner and a relationship based on real love and commitment is motivation for motherhood, this partner also needs to someone who will be enthusiastically and devotedly taking care in the childrearing as the mother. Or in the words of Suzana (36): "I want my child to have a father, too, because it needs one". Aware of the amount of responsibility and work around children, obstetric violence, and degraded social reproduction system, the refugee can be found in a supportive and caring partner, apart from economic stability. Anastazija's experience exemplifies how the presence of a supportive and involved partner enhances her maternal desire:

> "That situation where you are completely helpless with two children—I don't want that for myself. I told myself: you'll have money to pay for help, you'll have a husband, you won't be alone in this. You wake up at 6, go to bed at 11 at night, you are totally helpless, exhausted, you don't have time to wash yourself... Many mothers in Serbia are like that— husbands hardly help and are praid if he stays two nights in a row with the kids so she can go somewhere. That's help for women."

She described the episode she believes matches with the dominant model of mothering in Serbia: time precarity, stress, negative effect on the body, lack of time for self-care. Further, in her opinion the standards for evaluating men's participation in childrearing are low, as again the mother is the one that is punished brutally and the one that losses her autonomy. For Anastazija the solution is in a partner that would be more involved or she has a financial capacity to transfer a part of care work to an external professional. Dijana (37), similarly to childfree women thinks about the demands of mothering, and how they affect time autonomy and disrupt lifestyle (Peterson, 2015) that she appreciates. She recalls a visit to a friend's home, and describes homework struggles, picky eating, constant demands-and how such situations make her question if motherhood would be actually good for her:

Sometimes I think how wonderful it is to have children, and other times I wonder, who needs this?" I'm used to peace and quiet, to deciding how I spend my time. It would be a big change for me-you no longer have time for yourself; you're not the most important person anymore; someone else is. But, I say again, there are beautiful and difficult parts, and it's great when you have someone to share those difficult parts with."

As we can see, the loss of autonomy and time for herself, as well as freedom, is a decentive however, still it is mitigated through the presence of a committed partner that equally takes part in childrearing. Further, the partner is not only the one that takes care of the child but is also caring and present in the case the woman is vulnerable and need support. Anastazija (33), recounts how her husband's caregiving during her recovery after a medical procedure strengthened her wish to have children. She interpreted this as a signal that he would actively participate in parenting and made her desire motherhood, after what she called a "traumatic" experience of nannying after which she felt exhausted and almost forgo motherhood.

"When my husband cared for me after the medical procedure, it made me want to have children even more because it showed me that he would also take care of the children. That brought me to the path of motherhood"

As we can see again, the caring partner and stable relationship incentives the desire for motherhood again, as she could see herself sharing the work with her husband. The centrality of the shared responsibility emerges as a non-negotiable condition for motherhood among many single women, too and Valerija (31) articulates this clearly: "I hear comments like, 'She is lucky, he is helping her.' I mean (laughter)... But if I do not find someone TEN times better, I do not want it." Valerija's laughter at the word "help" as help should not be seen as a good will from the father, but a responsibility in the parenthood contract. Her critique resonates with the model of father's involvement in childbearing in which fathers do not do caretaking tasks on their own and as their initiative, but most commonly together with the mother, meaning at

the same time, and it is a model that has been found across all education groups (Šobot, 2022, 80). Therefore, the father should not be reminded about his role in parenthood but should have it interiorized. She further reflects on social skepticism regarding such standards and how it is considered a too "picky" and idealistic behavior in the context of Serbia:

> "In the community where I talk about how devoted my godfather is as a father, how involved he is, and how normal and wonderful that is to me, the comments are 'Don't expect to have someone like that in the future.' I was like, if I don't have someone like that, or ten times better, I can just show the door and that's it. " That's the environment in Serbia. And you don't have the right to complain—that it happens like this is a rarity, you don't have the right to expect, want, or make it different."

What we can see is that there in Valerija there is a desire for changing the patriarchal cultural norm in which men do not take part as much as women in the childbearing, however there is strong resistance towards this, and women who are vocal about it are being dismissed and silenced. This mothering regime becomes even more brutal if the partner is irresponsible after the divorce, and this fear of paternal irresponsibility, that women not only will be left without an ideal of a happy family life, but also that will carry all the burden on themselves was very much present in the narratives of single women, as we can see in the following comments:

> "Every mother who came to me, 70-80% of children are from divorced parents. The mother is left alone, raising the child and working, while the father is traveling, posting pictures, doesn't care, pays child support, and has done his part. This is something my mother does not think about when she tells me to have children". (Jasmina, 32)

> "Many women I know were left alone with children, sacrificing their lives, not being able to go to the hairdresser or gym, while the husband enjoys himself." (Valerija, 32)

As we can see, the fear that while they lose their freedom, individuality and time, men will be gaining social capital and living a happy life without the burden of care. Interestingly, their fear is similar to what some childfree women in Sweden identify as a decentive for motherhood: the idea that the inequalities in the private sphere cannot be overcome and that women by being a mother, will always be the ones paying the toll (Peterson, 2017). Actually, Silvija (34) discloses that her fear of double burden, of being both mother to the child and mother to the husband, made her consider solo adoption: "I would rather adopt and be a solo mother than be a mother to my partner." Interestingly many women in the research were critically assessing their previous, present or future relationships through the lens of potential parenting, as we can see from Dijana's (37) example:

> "I was thinking about what kind of fathers my previous partners would have been if we had stayed together—whether everything would fall on me related to the children, since they did their part just by making the child, cos "that's a woman's job".It probably would—but that's already my fault consciously or unconsciously for choosing such men. But I really think everything should be done equally and with some compromise, I don't know."

As we can see Dijana is less confident about her choices and blames herself for "choosing wrong", however it becomes clear how women actually and actively think about their partners qualities when considering motherhood. This was also the case for others, and some were looking at how their partners were treating animals, for example if they were taking enough care and how they were communicating with their pets, as they saw this as an indicator of how they might treat the future child. Similarly, to what Morris (2019, p. 279) found, single solo moms though they were desiring intimacy and new relationships, they were concerned and cautious about the risks that men might present for their emotional, sexual life and for the children. Additionally, my participant they were not only assessing how they would be fathers but also how they would treat them as partners. Silvija (34) is one of the women who is afraid

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of obstetric violence, and here criteria for the man would be the one who would be ready to stand by her during labour, which is not the usual practice in Serbia. Therefore, her future husband prioritizes the child and is involved in the situation and setting that is traditionally female, stepping outside the male practice of celebrating the birth of the child with male friends in a club or bar.

> "The number of men who would protect you during the labor is small. When she gives birth, while he is celebrating partying, while you are alone and unprotected. For me that is reason for divorce." (Silvija, 34)

> "My grandfather used to go to the market every Friday and brought flowers for my grandmother. He is the one who hangs the laundry, washes, cooks. When I was in 7th or 8th grade, he bought a sex manual-and left it on the table, saying, 'If you're interested, read it.' Maybe he was embarrassed, but he still bought it, My grandfather had two daughters, and if he were to be born again, he would still daughters. I had that role model and guide in a man." (Valerija, 31)

Further, Valerija and other women it shows how the ideal partner model for her is a man who can both show love and respect for women, as well as vulnerability and stepping aside of the normative masculinity within his generation, as for example, her grandfather embraced the fact that he had daughters instead of sons, when in Serbia in the past was often socially more desirable to have sons (Sekulic, 2016, p. 48).

Overall, what do these narratives tell us: most women mentioned that they know cases of some fathers that were participating more equally in the childrearing, and whey they were comparing it to the past and how they were raised, it seemed for them that the situation had improved. However, most of them were pushing for an even more equal private sphere contract in which man would not be praised for fathering, but that this would be normalized, as they were aware

of how mothering can punish women severely in terms of her freedom, time, body image and overall satisfaction with life. This is why both single and married women were evaluating and reflecting on their (future) partners to make sure they would not be punished in the future. However, many single women were feeling fear that eventually they would end up as what they were trying to prevent-divorced, left alone with children, overburdened or left without the happy ending of the family life (Morris, 2019). The partner they were wanting for themselves would be one that would be able to take the care work equally, in case of Silvija (34) be ready to protect them from the corrupted and violent health system, and at the same time be caring and loving, giving sense of stability and togetherness.

Conclusion subchapter 2:

In this subchapter we have seen that women observe and are aware of the aspects of brining and raising a child in the neoliberal capitalist mothering regime-the systemic corruption, lack of safety, and patriarchal gender regimes (Vilenica, 2013) contribute to a context of insecurity and risk that women consider when thinking about when and with whom to pursue motherhood. They were not mothers yet as they were waiting for the conditions that they considered were best for their personal well-being and their own criteria. As to the economic and structural issues, they were waiting for economic stability before they had to deal with the ruined system of social reproduction. What I found is that those who are single, as we saw, were looking for love and stability, but also a partner that would be equal and caring in parenthood, and this partner involvement was an incentive for embracing motherhood. The modified male breadwinner model (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016), which continues to assign disproportionate domestic and caregiving responsibilities to women, fuels caution toward this family model and men. Since for them unequal division of labor not only puts in danger women's autonomy and well-being but also it is important for their partner selection criteria.

However, some women like Dijana (37) feared that they would choose wrong even if they wanted ideally to be equal in the parenthood process. Further, Jasmina (32) and Valerija (31) was also vary as she considered that the mother "naturally" has more work that the father because of the biological processes, therefore the total equality is impossible.

Therefore, many women were expressing a preference for delaying motherhood, and one was considering even pursuing solo motherhood rather than assuming double burden of care both for the child and the partner. Single women spoke similarly to Veljović (2015) of how nowadays the relationships are fluid and unstable, as well as some single women discussed the difficulty on meeting new people and made a critique of the technologies of dating that are making it harder to find a partner, however I leave this to the future research to look into. The ideal women had of a caring, present and responsible partner was an image that for many women contrasted with what they saw in their surrounding-therefore they were fearing paternal irresponsibility, as well as structural precarity and the threat of obstetric violence. This made them therefore approach motherhood with caution and deliberation rather than, as they do not want to put themselves in a compromising position, or in a position of disappointment. Finally, I conclude that many women appear to seek refuge and emotional security in intimate relationships and love, as a form of stability and support when the broader social and state structures of neoliberalism regime fail to provide adequate protection and care for motherhood, as well as the individual economic stability that would help them survive the neoliberal system.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this thesis I asked the question do women in Serbia want to become mothers and why? How does this process look like? What is drawing them closer or further way from motherhood? Building on the previous rich national and international literature about motivation and transition to motherhood, I found out that most of the women in my research would like to become mothers, even though it is not the "central goal in their lives" (Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016) it is still something they would not easily forgo. However, the envisioning of this transition for some was much clearer and for some remained it remained a question mark, given the structural obstacles (Sekulić, 2016; Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016) and personal ones such as the lack of partner (Veljović, 2015). At the same time, what I found and that could be considered as "childfree attitudes" (Šumskaitė & Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė (2021) is that some women were asking themselves if motherhood is something that *they* would really want and need. Additionally, I found that one childfree woman in my research does not want to have children as it would affect her freedom and lifestyle, therefore it did not compensate. Interestingly, some women who were desiring motherhood were asking themselves the same question and the change of "old life(style)", freedom, and control of their free time and autonomy were strong demotivators. This could show, as I argue, an indication of how women value their well-being, autonomy, time, bodies both in the groups of those who want motherhood and those who forgo it. The intersection and reflection, and questioning their aspirations towards motherhood could be the indicator how some women are deconstructing the idea of motherhood as the only and the best and happiest path, however their motivations for motherhood in Serbia mostly remained connected to the gender identity (Kričković Pele Tomanović, Stanojević, Ljubičić, 2016), as in other countries, as well as to the heteronormative arrangement of marriage or stable and secure relationship with a caring and engaged partner

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and father (Ahmed, 2006; Morris, 2019). While the postponement mostly for those who were in married or who wanted to adopt, is clearly influenced by macro-structures, such as precarious system of social reproduction and the personal economic situation that was personally perceived as unstable, given the context of Serbia and the "eternal crisis", high value of family and marriage and pronatalism (Sekulić, 2016, Tomanović, 2017)- this can be read as a form of self-care that stresses out the personal desires and personal well-being, as well as ideals of more equality, autonomy and satisfaction in the relationship and parenthood. While they were transgressing the gender and familism regime ideals in Serbia that are based on gender asymmetry between women and man (Šobot, 2022) and looking both for stable relationships but also men who would be embracing more the care ethics (Ceriman, 2019) in parenthood, their discourse still positions motherhood within the ideal of the romantic family that ultimately is privatized, naturalized and individualized in bio-kinship (Week, 2021). This ultimately, as Weeks argues (2021) in many cases cannot withstand the pressures of the neoliberal system that in words of Vilenica (2013) "is brutal".

On a more micro-level of the negotiating motherhood, though situated in the shared context of motherhood ideology, (romantic) familism and neoliberal and patriarchal regime, I found out it is a unique and diverse among women, as they were living it with different intensity and emotions-some were hopeful, sad, frustrated, confused, unsure-which I hope my research was able to contribute by using qualitative research to show how (non)motherhood transition is not unhesitant and easy, and that is both shaped, in Chodorow manner (1995, p. 518) by "individuality and independence, as well as relations of domination" At the same time, I suggest though (non)motherhood is influenced by the personal (Chodorow, 1995) and the personal individuality has an undeniable meaning, given the large system of matrygyist discourses (Meyers, 2001, p. 794) in which women live, transition to motherhood should be

submitted to a more complex, open and honest social conversation, ideally via feminism, given

the variety of different experiences of the non-mothers.

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