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Querida Mamá

Stigmatization and Vulnerability of Single Mothers in the Guatemalan Countryside

Author: Jonna Andersson
Supervisor: Katarina Sjöberg

Abstract

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Author: Jonna Andersson
Supervisor: Katarina Sjöberg
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Summary
Based on individual interviews with six single mothers in the Guatemalan countryside this thesis describes the stigmatization and vulnerability of women who depart from the norm of a society ruled by men. Guatemala is an underdeveloped and violent country, where both men and women are exposed. The vulnerability of women, however, is in many cases huge since the culture of *machismo* and male superiority is very dominant within the country. To become a mother in this kind of society, without living together with a man, is a departure from the norm leading to stigmatization and exclusion. The aim of this thesis is to create a bigger understanding for the women ending up in stigmatization, describing their situation as they understand it. By using qualitative interviews and a balance between closeness and distance in the study, the thesis focuses on the standpoint of the mothers. The thesis describes a tough reality facing single mothers breaking the norm in the Guatemalan society. By showing that they are able to live without a man the mothers at the same time question the norm and slowly break their own stigma, showing that female independency is possible.

Keywords
Guatemala, single mothers, machismo, stigmatization

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

> Single mothers, who have lower earning capacities relative to men and more
> responsibility for their children's well-being, exemplifies the vulnerabilities of all
> women – vulnerabilities that are hidden when the women have a secure tie to
> breadwinners. Indeed, the deprived circumstances of single mothers are sometimes an
> incentive for women to marry (or to not divorce). /…/ women's economic dependency
> is a significant basis for men's power advantage in families. (Orloff, 1993:319)

Orloff's perspective in the quote above is essential to the foundation of this thesis. Looking at
the situation of a group of single mothers gives us the possibility to understand the
susceptibility of women in society as a whole. Economic dependency becomes clear when the
participating single mothers live in a context where having a child without a present father is
connected with shame and stigmatization, and where no social security is to be found. This is
one reason I chose to conduct the study of single motherhood in Guatemala.

In many Latin American societies today men's power advantage, both in society and within
the family, is supported and maintained not only by economic factors, but also by men having
'the upper hand' in gender relations, with violence being common practice (Lancaster,
1994:39). Guatemala is one of the poorest and most violent countries in Latin America. Its
dramatic history has created huge differences between various cultures in its society,
especially affecting the native population, the Mayan people (www.swedenabroad.com). In a
culture where men are the sole contributors to the economy of their families, women end up
being the dependent on men both in social and economic terms.

With this thesis my aim is to provide an understanding of the situation of single mothers in a
small Guatemalan town. My focus is on single mothers, living in a context where men have
all or most of the power, and where two-parent families are the norm.

When trying to understand the situation of an exposed group, it is important to listen to them
using their own words to describe their situations. Only in that way their understanding of

their own reality will be revealed. Therefore, my main focus is the women's own perspectives and stories. My research questions concentrate on issues concerned with:

- Their experiences of becoming a single mother in a society ruled by men; and
- The relationship of *machismo* and *stigmatization* with single motherhood.

Outline of the study

The following chapter will give the reader a short overview of Guatemala. This is followed by a chapter on *Methodology*, which discusses the different methods used throughout the study, as well as ethical considerations, limitations of the study, different roles of the researcher and a presentation of the field and participants. The chapter titled *Theoretical approach* describes the concepts of women and family, machismo and stigmatization. These chapters are followed by *Analysis*. Here I will describe the participating mothers and share their views of aspects discussed in previous chapters, focusing on the mothers' own stories. The final chapter is *Concluding remarks*.

Background

In this chapter the reader will be given a short introduction to the most important parts of Guatemalan history and statistics. This will serve as a key to deeper understanding of the situation and exposedness of single mothers in the Guatemala context. I also give a short overview of previous research in the field.

To be able to present the latest information and statistic from the field the facts in this chapter are taken from frequently updated web pages of the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (UD), the Swedish Embassy and the web based newspaper *Latinamerika*.

Guatemala

After almost 40 years of brutal war, the Peace Accords were signed in late December 1996. However, the poverty, violence and discrimination in Guatemala did not disappear with the

end of the war. Guatemala still has one of the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of all the Latin American countries and the disparity of income levels in Guatemala is one of the greatest in the world (http://hdrstats.undp.org).

The indigenous population in Guatemala has been marginalised both economically and politically. A great percentage of the population lives in the rural areas, where social services are sparse. Even though Guatemala signed the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* as early as 1982, the differences between women and men are still significant. In 2007, the average income of Guatemalan men was three times higher than for women and there were two times more unemployed women compared to men (ibid). The illiteracy rate among women the same year was about 50% higher than among men (ibid). A cause for these disparities is the cultural ideas about women being "natural" child caretaker and therefore predetermined to take care of the daily household chores. The men, on the other hand, are seen upon as household breadwinners. Today, the poorest population in Guatemala is predominately Mayan women (www.swedenabroad.com).

Guatemala is also a country formed by violence and corruption. Since the end of the Civil War, the crime rate has risen and today, poverty, inequality and insecurity are big problems. Furthermore, of late, drug traffic has increased remarkably and the lack of a functioning judicial system has led to an almost non-existent rule of law. In 2008, exemption from punishment in Guatemala was 98% (Silveira Wennergren, 2009). The most vulnerable groups to the ongoing crime are women and children. Serious violence against women is very high and is still increasing (www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se).

Today Guatemala has the lowest ranking of all Latin American countries on the UN's Gender-related Development Index (GDI), indicating large gender inequalities. Abortion is illegal if the mother's life is not at risk and therefore a high number of preventable deaths among mothers are caused by illegal abortions (www.manskligarattigheter.gov.se). In 2007, the Guatemalan law changed. Today a man cannot avoid punishment for sexual abuse simply by marrying the victim; however, a definition of sexual abuse still does not exist in the Guatemalan legislation (ibid). In the first half of 2007, the number of reports of family violence was 1,225 cases. During this same period, there were 226 reports of sexual abuse (ibid). The real number of cases directed towards women is probably much higher, but as a result of the predominant cultural perceptions of women, and the extremely high level of

impunity, a lot of cases are not reported. Today 19.5% of all the Guatemalan mothers are single parents (INE, 2002).

Previous research

There is previous research already done in the field of single mothers in general. Early feminist research brings up the question of lone-parenting and the myths and regulations surrounding the mother. There is also feminist research focused on mothers living in a context very different from what we find in Guatemala (Myrdal 1956; Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Roman 2004). This literature will not constitute any wider base for this thesis since the circumstances substantiating this literature in most cases are too far away from the context where this study is conducted.

There is also literature discussing the situation of women in different parts of Latin America, in contexts more like the Guatemalan. In her book *Motherwork and Politics in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (1995), sociologist and gender researcher Diana Mulinari explores the meaning of motherhood in a Sandinista, Nicaragua. This book and other literature explore the field of women and female subordination, but mostly centred on questions concerning women's engagement in the political sphere.

I have chosen to focus on the subordination of women in family and society by referring to writers including sociologist R. A. Sydie, anthropologist Matthew Gutmann, sociologist Alfredo Mirandé and theorist Erving Goffman. I choose to focus on Sydie because of her critical way of seeing many theorists before her as sex-blind when discussing the subordination of women. Both Gutmann and Mirandé provide an understanding of the concept of *machismo*, one of the main reasons for the high numbers of single mothers in the Guatemalan and Latin context. Goffman's description of the concepts of *self-presentation* and *stigma* help explain the exclusion of single mothers from the Guatemalan society.

Literature on stigmatisation of women within *machismo* cultures is difficult to find. This may be due to the fact that gender-inequalities and women's exclusion lay so deep within the *machismo* cultures that the stigmatization is becoming hard to define. Guatemala differs from many other Latin American countries because of the wide disparities between rich and poor, as well as the large number of indigenous population being exploited and discriminated.

Studies dealing specifically with the situation of women in Guatemala are limited and there is a lack of proper data and statistics.

Methodology

In my study I focus on the basic feelings and needs of women who are excluded from the larger society. In the following chapter, I will give a short overview of the qualitative method used in the study, with emphasis on interviews with the participating mothers. In addition, I present the method on closeness and distance to the subject studied, ethical considerations, boundaries of the study and the field and participating mothers.

One of the main theorists referred to in this chapter is sociologist Charles Lemert (1988; 2004), who emphasizes the role of the persons included in the study, both the researcher and the respondents. Also sociologists Gunnar Andersson and Anders Persson (1999) are referred to in the discussion on closeness and distance to the interview person. Sociologist Nancy Napels (2003), together with Martyn Denscombe (2009) and Alan Bryman (2008), both professors in social research, give us a wider perspective on the limitations and boundaries of the study. The discussion on ethical consideration is built on the regulations from the former *Humanistisk-samhällsvetenskapliga forskningsrådet* (The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Science).

The use of qualitative research method

Since my main interest in this research was to get to know the lives and the experiences of the mothers themselves, I considered qualitative research method to be the most suitable for the study. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann captured it well by writing:

> The qualitative research method attempts to understand the world from the research persons' point of view, develop a meaning from their experiences, and reveal their lived world as it was before the scientific explanations.[1] (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009:17)

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[1] Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun söker förstå världen från undersökningspersonernas synvinkel, utveckla mening ur deras erfarenheter, avslöja deras levda värld som den var före de vetenskapliga förklaringarna.

As can be seen from the quote qualitative research methods give room to flexibility and freedom while giving priority to the views and experiences of the persons participating in the study. In line with the aims and goals of using qualitative methods, my focus is a small group of women, six in all.

A main goal is to highlight the situation of women who are particularly vulnerable, giving a voice to their stories and lives. I wanted the women to be the *knowers and actors* as Charles Lemert puts it (1988:105). The *standpoint of women* should not just be a form of presenting women's oppression, as having a determinate character, but it should be a method that not only allows women to speak but also gives room to listen to what they say, by using a method that emphasizes the importance of them being heard (ibid:106).

The interview

I used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix) and I began with questions about women's general facts such as age, name, personal history and current situation, in order for me to be able to contextualize the responses. This kind of interview guide directs the interview into more sensitive areas concerning personal views. During the interview I tried to avoid dichotomous questions leading to yes and no answers. Instead, I kept the questions open-ended, permitting the interviews to wander off, giving room to unexpected and new information (Patton, 2002:353f).

Throughout the fieldwork, I kept the atmosphere as friendly and open to sentiments and feelings as possible. Due to the fact that I was introduced to the mothers included in the study by a mutual friend, my presence and relations with them turned out to be relaxed and easygoing. Still, I am an Anglo-Saxon woman with an academic education, which makes my experience very different from the mothers in the study. I soon became friends with the participating mothers, but my status as *la amiga sueca* (the Swedish friend) always reminded me of my special position as a white, travelling foreigner among the Guatemalan village women. Well aware of my role as a friend, researcher, and wealthy European and academic, conducting the study without bias was not an easy task. I tried to focus on my role as a researcher, balancing it with being a friend of the participants, to gather as open and honest answers as possible.

After first asking each participant for permission, I used a small tape recorder in the interviews with the single mothers. Using a tape recorder is of course a risk – it may well serve to undermine the intimate communion that is needed for a creative interview (Douglas, 1985:83). But in my case I found it useful in the sense that I could compare my notes with the taped interviews later on. Since the interviews were conducted in the Spanish language – which is not my vernacular language, although I speak it and can make myself understood – the recorded material functioned as a mechanism to ensure that no important ideas or conversations were lost in the immediate translation.

The interviews took the form of face to face interviews with one person at a time. The length of the interviews varied between 30 to 90 minutes. Each participant was interviewed more than once, up to three times. The interviews took place in the homes of the mothers or in a house where they felt at home, and they were conducted without the presence of any other adult.

Closeness and distance

To draw the line between being personal and private is challenging. Showing the informants understanding and asking the right questions without telling too much about one's personal, private life is a subtle balance. As a researcher, it was important to reach the closeness of being personal, while at the same time keeping the distance by not discussing my own personal experiences during the interview process.

The method of closeness and distance involves being able to see the phenomena studied both through closeness and distance. In *Närhet/distans, forskare/informant, forskning/undervisning – några avslutande reflektioner* (1999), sociologists Gunnar Andersson and Anders Persson discuss the concept and propose a reciprocal action between them both (ibid:195). Closeness and distance could be a description of physical or geographical placement, but another aspect of the concept has to do with the character of relations (ibid:194). In that sense closeness is distinguished by familiarity and warmth and based on the equality of the contracting parties. The concept of distance on the other hand, when the character of relations is considered, is distinguished by less confidentiality and a cold atmosphere. In this case, the emotional aspect is not present and the relationship is neutral, including both subject and object (ibid).

Qualitative research allows us to get close to the people being studied, giving room to express individuality and personal character. At the same time, there is a risk of getting too close and manipulating, or being manipulated by, the participant (ibid:196). Andersson and Persson propose an interaction between closeness and distance where closeness is aimed for during the actual field work, while distance is strived for in the process of analysis (ibid:197). While carrying out the process of this thesis, I have chosen not to display too much personal concern or share my own stories, to keep the distance during the closeness that was developed in the interviews.

Ethical considerations

The former *Humanistisk-samhällsvetenskapliga forskningsrådet* (The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Science) has developed *Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning* (Research Ethics Principles in Humanistic-Social Scientific Research) to give researchers in social science and the humanities guiding norms, supporting a good relationship between the researcher and the individuals involved in a study. The four ethical principles are *the principle of information*, *the principle for consent*, *the principle of confidentiality* and *the principle of use*.

According to *the principle of information* (informationskravet) the researcher must inform the participants about the aim of the study, the participant's role in it and the conditions of participation. The participants must also be informed that their participation is voluntary and that they are allowed to terminate their participation at any point. Before carrying out each interview I, with help from my local contact Alfonso Tujab, told the participant why I was there, why she was chosen for an interview and that nothing was mandatory. I also gave my Guatemalan phone number to all of the participants so that they could contact me at any time.

The principle for consent (samtyckeskravet) states that the participants have the right to decide their level of participation in the study. This was assured in this study through a very open dialogue where the participants from the beginning were informed that it was up to them to what extent they wanted to participate.

The third principle is *the principle of confidentiality* (konfidentialitetskravet), stating that all information concerning the participants must be kept as confidential as possible. Personal details of the participants should be stored and reported in a way that makes identification of

the participants impossible for any unauthorized persons. To ensure confidentiality, all the names of the participating mothers in this study have been altered and while presented in this thesis, they will never be described in detail as individuals. Only I had access to the written and recorded material during the research process, and at an early stage I made sure to alter all the names and personal descriptions within the material. I have also chosen not to mention the name of the market town where the study was conducted to protect the identities of the women, avoiding to create further stigmatization.

According to the fourth and last principle, *the principle of use* (nyttjandekravet), the information must not be used for any other purpose beyond scientific research and personal information regarding the participants is not to be given to any unauthorized persons. Following this principle no one else than me have had access to the research material and the information collected is exclusively used for the making of this thesis.

Boundaries and limitations

I used personal contacts to find the single mothers for the survey. This way of finding participants is limiting, but at the same time it was a very good way of creating personal relationships with the participants. Alan Bryman also mentions how the field is in constant change and that coincident and luck with meeting the right people could be as important as good planning by the researcher (2008:401ff).

It is also possible that the language, by not being my first language, created limitations for the study. If Spanish was my mother tongue, I may have been able to ask questions more freely, and not prepare specific questions for the interviews as I did. Conducting all the interviews on my own in Spanish, without a translator, may have affected my understanding of the answers given by the mothers, since I was not always able to catch every word and their undertones. This source of error is hopefully reduced by using a tape recorder during the interviews, and asking the mothers again for clarification when something seemed unclear. I also built stronger personal relationships with the participants by giving them the opportunity to help me. This built more trust between us, even though they sometimes had to explain twice how they were thinking.

Through the use of standpoint theory and semi-structured interviews with just a few informants, the participants in the research get important and powerful roles in shaping what

we come to know, as Nancy Napels argues (2003:37). This could be a danger while trying to give a picture of a wider phenomenon, but in this case I consider the small number of participants to be a strength. By analyzing the voices of a couple of Guatemalan women, the reader will be given an exclusive insight into the situation of single mothers in a specific context. What is important though is that the reader is aware of the limited selection and that the picture given is not applicable to all single mothers living in Latin America or even in Guatemala.

Conducting the fieldwork of this study I only heard one side of the story, the story the mothers chose to tell me. I have chosen not to include the fathers, nor the families of the single mothers in this study. This choice is partly practical, due to the lack of time and the ease in finding the male respondents, and partly deliberate, to be able to illustrate the viewpoints of the mothers, giving a subjective but honest picture of what it is like to be a single mother in the Guatemalan context. My aim is to give the mothers a voice, letting the ones, who are normally talked *about* in society, tell their own stories. After a dozen of interviews with the mothers, complemented by informal meetings with the same, and observations of their situations, I can verify much of what the women have told me about their situations. Similar reports on single motherhood in a Latin American context are also to be found in earlier literature and from my own experiences traveling in Latin America. All cases are unique, but can be seen as a part of a wider category (Denscombe 2009:48).

Even if the aim of this thesis is to raise the voices of the single mothers, I will always be a part of what I express in my writings, affecting the truth of the mothers with my own picture of reality (Lemert, 2004:389f). Another risk with getting to close to the respondents is that I might take their party, seeing their version of the truth as the only truth. However, as I mentioned before, the purpose with this study is to show the reality of the participating mothers, not to decide whose reality might be the most accurate one. If more time was given, it would have been interesting to not only to include fathers as well as additional mothers, but also to conduct group interviews and use participatory method to get a wider perspective.

The field
The field study was conducted in a small market town in the central highlands of Guatemala. The population of the town in 2002 was around 7,100 people; about 87% of the population is of Mayan origins. Even though the department where the study was conducted is considered

to be the wealthiest in the region, about 64% of the population live on less than two dollars a day (INE 2008). The percentage of single mothers living in this area is similar to that of the general population (ibid).

The town chosen has a large Mayan and poor population, including single mothers, and serves as a good example of a semi-urban Guatemalan society. The exposedness of the mothers living on their own is identifiable in a context with a large poor population, working hard to maintain a proper life. The size of the town also provides a basis for stigmatization since most of the inhabitants know each other's personal conditions and situations through daily social interactions.

Participants

The six participating mothers are between the ages of 22 to 36 with between one to three young children of their own. Five of the participants are of Mayan origins and one is *ladino*[2] with Mayan grandfathers. Except for the youngest woman, who still lives with her parents, the participating mothers live by themselves, paying a monthly rent for their small homes. They all have a low income; three of the women work in the informal private sector selling bracelets, food and drinks in the streets, while the other three receive a fixed salary. One of the mothers included in the study receives a small sum of money from the father of their common children on some occasions while the other mothers do not receive any such economic assistance. None of the mothers included in the study receives financial help from parents or other relatives.

The educational level of the mothers participating in my study varies, including some who never attended school, some who are school "drop outs" and some who are in school or have some kind of educational training. Common to the mothers is that they had to start working at early ages. The women who had educational training at some point in their lives worked and studied at the same time.

The chosen group of participating mothers is not a homogeneous group. There is variation in their backgrounds, ethnicity and schooling, giving a nuanced view of being a single mother. For the sake of anonymity, I use fictive names to keep the identity of the participants secret.

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[2] In Spanish ladino or mestizo, describing a person with both European ("white") and indigenous American origin (http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/).

Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will introduce the theoretical framework used for analyzing the empirical results of the study. The first part shortly discusses family-related questions and gender studies. During the collection of the empirical material, I found that a big issue for the women involved is that they are simply stigmatized and put aside from the rest of the society, so an introduction to roles and stigma is also given.

Two of the theorists referred to in this chapter are R. A. Sydies with *Natural Women, Cultured Men: A Feminist Perspective on Sociological Theory* (1995), and Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva with *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist Perspectives on Lone Mothering* (2003), giving the reader some perspectives on the otherwise male dominated field of social theory and female subordination in family and society. Matthew Gutman, author of *The Meanings of Macho – Being a Man in Mexico City* (2007), and Alfredo Mirandé, author of *Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and Latino Culture* (1997), both help us understand the culture of *machismo* and male domination in a Latino context. To give the reader a deeper understanding of the concepts of social roles and *stigmatization* a short presentation of Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1982) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1990) is given, complemented by the chapter *Stigma: Introduction and Overview* (2003) written by Dovidio et al.

Family, sex and female subordination

R. A. Sydie, professor of sociology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, accuses the science of human nature of being theoretically sex-blind and that theorists like John Locke have used the female reproductive capacity to justify the male domination of women (Sydie, 1995:1f). This view in historical research is of course coloured by the fact that almost all ancient theorist have been male and, many times without reflecting on it, they have presented their findings from their own, male, point of view. This is why it is hard, even today, to find theories evaluating the situation of women in pre-historical societies, giving their perspective on needs and wants. Sydie further claims that the allocation of different tasks of women and men, based on the assumption that there are differences between the sexes, is common in most

societies. But the sort of assumption and the division of tasks differ greatly among different societies (ibid:7). In societies where the power is inevitable in the hands of one of the sexes, and where a clear dichotomy helps keeping up the distance between those two, the sex without power becomes completely left out in the hands of the powerful sex and their demands.

> Men are not dominant over women as a result of superior physical strength, or any special intellectual powers, but because, before the development of birth control, women were at the mercy of their biological constitution. Frequent pregnancy, and continuous caring for infants, made them dependent on males for material provision. (Giddens, 1991:169)

What sociologist Anthony Giddens points out in this text is that the male dominance was mainly developed because of the biological differences between the two sexes. More than one time, theorists come back to biology while talking about female subordination. Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann (2007) shows in a survey on gender issues in Mexico City and its surrounds, that many men think that it is in man's nature to be unable to say no to sex. This would justify him to commit adultery, leaving it up to the woman to make sure that her husband stays faithful. At the same time women are expected to be faithful and men seldom forgive their wife if she commits adultery (ibid:130ff).

Also Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva discusses the theme of female subordination in connection to mothering and family life. She states that a lot of different pictures of motherhood is given in feminist research, often is the role of the mother degraded. She argues that mothers have lost their status in history while the concept of mothering has been degraded and men's capacity to control mothering has increased (2003:13). With mothering in general losing its status, lone motherhood is stigmatized and characterized by a weak economy. Working-class unmarried women in the old British society were considered 'bad mothers' since they departed to much from the norm and the 'normalized motherhood' (ibid:4).

Men's world

In a large number of societies throughout the world there is an ideology of masculinity and the state of being a 'real man' or a 'true man.' The so-called cult of masculinity is not unique to Guatemalan or Latino men, but can be found in all Mediterranean cultures. In a Latin

American context, terms like *machismo* and *machistas* is not only a cult, but has even become a part of everyday language (Mirandé, 1997:16).

When it comes to Latino men and masculinity, much has been said and written, but very little research has been conducted (ibid:5). Sociologist Alfredo Mirandé is one of the researchers who recently held a survey in a Mexican context. He finds in his study among 105 Latino/Mexican men that a main part of the respondents were negative in their views of the word *macho*, giving the term conceptions such as insecurity, exaggeration, dominance, violence, aggressiveness and egoism (ibid: 68). A couple of the respondents, categorized as neutral in their answers, made a clear division between the word *macho*, which could have a positive tone meaning that one is brave, and *machismo* or *machista*, being a negative way of thinking, as it is applied to drunkards and trouble makers (ibid:75f). When talking about men and male behaviour in this study, the words being used by the participating mothers were *machismo* and *machista*, both of them with negative connotations.

Mirandé also gives us a deeper understanding of the concept of gender roles in the Latin culture by evaluating Mexican sayings, stories and folk ballads. While the woman always should be faithful to her husband, always honouring and obeying him, the man should have all the authority and respect in the family. He should be the boss even if he cannot provide for his family, and it is natural for him to 'fool around' both before and after getting married (Mirandé, 1997:87ff). Yet another concept in the culture of Latino men reminds us the superiority of man is *la casa chica* (the small house), referred to by Gutmann (2007). *La casa chica* is an expression applied to a residence or a commitment where the man keeps his mistress, or 'second wife', apart from his main household (ibid:138ff).

The *machista* ideas and values also include violence to some extent, both in the family and outside. Many Latino men see themselves as victims to a culture they somehow have to live up to. And many agree that women sometimes deserve being beaten up, for instance when they do not take care of the household or when they complain too much (ibid: 210ff). Many men also explain the abuse of their wives as a question of men having to tolerate abuse from bosses, foremen, traffic cops and so on, then seeking an outlet for their frustration in their own homes (ibid: 211). Wife beating is a clear part of *machismo* and also a way for the husband to show his wife who is stronger and who should obey. Many women are strongly influenced by

the church's view of marriage, where women are supposed to be self-sacrificing in their homes, letting themselves be beaten and mistreated by their husbands (ibid: 207).

Shared expectations and stigma

Whenever we meet people we put up a certain facade, to show other people who we are and understand our position in the group. Talcott Parsons describes the society as centrally structured around a main set of shared values, or roles. The society is also structured hierarchically, meaning that individuals belonging to certain parts of the society, and recognised as being closer to the main values of society, will be seen as superior to others (Dovidio et al., 2003:32). Also Erving Goffman prepared detailed theories on roles and co-existence, saying that we lead our lives by interference and we act upon how others act to us. (Goffman, 1982:15)

Goffman is probably the most famous theorist when it comes to social interference and stigmatization. He explains our need of having already processed information on an individual entering our social context with the need of understanding his socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude towards us and what way we are expected to act towards him (Goffman, 1982:13). He also claims that it is normal for humans avoiding open contradictions. Sometimes it is expected to suppress feelings or actual thoughts to have a situation at least temporarily acceptable for everyone (ibid:20).

From time to time people end up in situations where it is impossible to avoid open contradictions or interferences. That often leads to social exclusion and loss of human value, something that I would define as *stigmatization*. Even though the Greeks originated the term *stigma* to refer to signs cut or burnt into the body, exposing something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier, today the term is used to refer to the disgrace itself rather than to the bodily evidence (Goffman, 1990:11). Stigma is a social construction, meaning that time and place decides if a special characteristic is stigmatized or not. It is also very dependent on the norms in a specific society. The stigmatized person represents a departure from those normative expectations (Dovidio et al., 2003:4). This means that a certain personality or quality might be stigmatized in one country, but considered a part of the norm in another. Being a single mother is a good example of this social construction, where today being a single mother, or single parent, is not strange at all in a Swedish context, but it was fifty years ago, and still it is a reason for social exclusion in a country like Guatemala.

Another significant factor in whether a person is stigmatized or not is the controllability of the stigma. Those with stigmas that are perceived by the society to be controllable and self-earned are in general more rejected than those whose stigmas are perceived to be uncontrollable by the bearer (ibid:7). Also the function that stigmatization have for the dominant group in a certain context, is decisive when it comes to the treatment of an already stigmatized person. (ibid: 9). This is a very important factor when looking at the situation of single mothers in a Guatemalan context, since the difference in stigmatization between the mothers and fathers in this respect is clear. Since men are in power, the stigmatization of women makes the power of men even bigger, helping the men to keep control of the women, both at home and in society as a whole. Stigma also helps building up the self-esteem of the stigmatizer, giving them a feeling of control, offering them a way to buffer their anxiety through comparing themselves to less fortunate others (ibid:7). This is something important to consider while trying to understand the action of other women and mothers in the social context. If a woman is being mistreated as a wife or mother, or feels uncomfortable in her position as the same, stigmatizing women who are not like them will help them control their own anxiety.

Analysis

In this chapter I will try to raise the voices of the single mothers participating in this study, to let them describe their reality. The focus will be on the spoken stories of the mothers, but it will be discussed in comparison with the theories presented in the previous chapter. The main themes being discussed, in dialogue with the themes discussed earlier in the theoretical chapter, are *dependency*, *defining machismo, male violence* and *stigmatization*.

Dependency

Something that the informants in this thesis have in common is that they chose to keep the child they were carrying. Abortion is illegal in Guatemala but the option still exists, even if there is an impending risk for the mother to get infertile or even killed because of the insufficient knowledge and non-sterilized environments. Still, knowing this, friends and family of the informants told them that they could not keep their children. "It will cost you!" and "You won't make it by your own" were some of the things they were told. But they all

decided to keep their children even when most of them did not live with the father of the child.

As Sydie generally argues, the allocation of different tasks of women and men is prominent in the Guatemalan society. The most common comment about being a single mother is that it is very lonely and stressful. Maria expresses that it has to do with the double roles she has to play as a single mother.

You can't just be a mother and do everything at home. You also have to work, make sure that your child has everything he needs. This is how it is to be both mother and father at the same time. And it's hard. It's hard to be a single mother. (Interview with Maria, 15/4)

Brenda, who has got three young kids on her own with two different men, is only able to work with random jobs, mostly selling things at the Sunday market. Her situation is very delicate and she talks about how she often does not even know what she will give her children to eat the following day.

I don't consider myself a happy woman today. I consider myself bitter and I see how my personality changes. I can get very upset for things that might be small, but for me they turn out huge. It might be because I don't feel happy. Sometimes I start crying, thinking for myself: 'When will I start to feel happy?' Today my life, both economically and morally, is so infected that I can't feel happy. I can't find the happiness among all those problems. (Interview with Brenda, 24/3)

Obviously the economy is an important question when it comes to lone parenting, and most of the mothers miss the financial support from a man. But what is also missed in the small, single mother-headed families is moral support, another adult to share things with and help in making decisions. At the same time, a majority of the mothers do not really seem to rely on men anymore and once having a more stable income they all say something similar as Natali: *I'm happy because I'm not dependent on any man. I'm proud to be able to make it on my own!* (Interview with Natali, 28/3)

This pride of being able to make it on their own, without a man, is a very important part of the success and source of energy empowering the mothers to move on. As Sydie points out, in

societies where a clear dichotomy helps the powerful sex too keep the power, the sex without power becomes completely left out in the hands of the powerful sex. Being able to avoid being controlled by a man is what empowers Natali to keep on struggling.

Defining machismo

Talking about single motherhood, economy and men or other related subjects with the mothers, the theme of machismo always comes up. Everyone has got their own definition of what machismo really is, but it all comes down to the power and freedom of men. One of the more common interpretations of machismo among the mothers is that the man needs to have a lot of women.

To have a lot of women is machismo. They feel like real men when they have a lot of women, but they're not, it's just pure machismo. To have a lot of women is not to be a man, it's being machista. (Interview with Gabriela, 27/3)

The father of Gabriela's child had several women during the time they were in a relationship. All of the women in this study have a lot of stories to tell about how men in their closer social network always seem to have a need for more than one woman. Just as the picture given in Mexican sayings and folk ballads, women should be faithful while men are allowed to fool around, and the idea of a woman having more than one man makes the mothers laugh and shake their heads. The focus on men's needs returns in many of the interviews. Brenda describes how Guatemalan men can not be happy without at least one woman; often they need more than one.

For him (the man) sex is happiness, it's as simple as that. But for me as a woman I need so much more to be happy. /…/ A man can just follow his lust. When he wants a woman he can have it, and if not he won't. /…/ I have to worry about what I will give to the kids for breakfast, how I will get enough money for food and how much I need to sell in the market to accomplish that. He just cares about his own needs. (Interview with Brenda, 24/3)

The hope in finding a good man is not great. *Among a hundred there will be a few*, Gabriela says when we talk about if there are men who are not abusive. Most of the participating mothers are sure that they would need to stop working if they found a new man, even if they

rather remain working for a stable income. Gabriela, who already has been married, says that she had to ask for permission to go out and decide the time when she would be back again.

It's like still living with daddy. But that's very common, the man decides for you. It's strange that the men can decide for the women… But to have a husband in your home is a big compromise. (Interview with Gabriela, 27/3)

As a single mother there are also other ways of being vulnerable to the superiority of men. Gabriela tells me about how a lot of men target mothers that live alone. She says that she has lied to a lot of men about being married or having a boyfriend just to be left alone. *Otherwise they won't stop until they get what they want. That's just how men are, they think: 'She already has a child, she already had a man so she's easy to get.'* (Interview with Gabriela, 27/3) Not one of the mothers, even if they feel uncomfortable in the way the men many times choose to see them as objects trying to use them, act if they think it is strange that the men can act this way. *It's like tradition that men have more women. Or well, it's not really tradition, but it's a habit that the women help the men to shape.* (Interview with Gabriela, 27/3) This is a very interesting comment, that the machismo really can be seen as a tradition or a habit, shaped and maintained not only by the men, but also by the women. Gutmann raises the question of women accepting the role as subordinated and mistreated because of a dominating church and powerful men. Heatherton et al. points out how the stigmatizer, in many cases women, feel better with their own situation if they can buffer their own anxiety on someone who does not follow a norm where they themselves feel unhappy or misplaced. In this way the world of the mothers in this survey, falling outside the norm of church and male domination, gets very vulnerable and lonely.

Male violence

A concept adapted more or less officially in the Guatemalan society is the machismo. In the market town where the field work was conducted, it is not unusual that men brag about how many mistresses they have in nearby villages or even in the same town. This is a sign of exactly the same phenomena as Gutmann names *la casa chica* in his study of Mexican men. A combination of male dominance, probably forced by the dominating machismo culture, a strong church and frustration at work or in society, makes the men hold on to their tough attitude towards women, forcing women to obey. Those women who decide not to live with

such a man most of the time face a tough reality where stigmatization and poverty is a big part of the deal.

The picture of *machismo* culture that Mirandé illustrates, with an obeying wife and a man never to be questioned, repeats itself many times in the interviews with the mothers. Living without a man is almost seen as a freedom, described by Maria like this:

Living without a man is beautiful. I can go out, meet friends or invite friends over. With a man you can't. He can say: 'Hey, you stay here!', and then you have to stay home. The men will get jealous if you meet friends, chat with people in the streets or just have fun. /.../ There are men that are jealous for the same reason that they are in love, that's at least what they say. They want to control their women because they love them. And they want to know everything - where you've been, what you have done, and who you've met. Because the men want to teach their women how to live their lives and the women learn. It's like being in school, like learning how to read and write! And if I would start asking him the same questions he would get mad. Sometimes it's like being in court. (Interview with Maria, 15/4)

The women in this study witness of men who are controlling and always have to know where their wife or girlfriend is and what she is doing. They want to know where she is going, what she is going to do, who she might meet and when she will return home. If she returns home late he might punish her. One of the informant's relationships even ended because she could not stand her boyfriend's jealousy. Similar to Mirandé's study, the single mothers in this study also start to talk about violence in relation to *machismo*. Natalie says:

There exists a lot of machismo here. /.../ The majority of the men think that they are the boss over their woman. It's sad, but that's the way it is. The men don't want anyone else to be superior. /.../ They think that women don't have the right to think and have their own opinions, that's why they end up hitting. (Interview with Natali, 28/3)

Her niece is hit a lot by her husband and sometimes she ended up in the hospital, but she refuses to report him. One time Natali found her niece and her husband in the street close to where they live.

He was hitting her and I stopped him and asked him why he did that. He just answered, 'She didn't serve me my food.' But when I asked him if she didn't make him any food he said 'Well yes she did, but she didn't serve it.' (Interview with Natali, 28/3)

Her story seems to confirm Gutmann's theory that many men agree that women sometimes deserve being beaten. The self-sacrificing role that women are supposed to take on is strengthened by the lack of faith in politicians and authorities among women. Maria says that women could report their men to the police but that most of the women do not: *A lot of women are scared so they keep quiet until one day they get killed. /.../ The men feel powerful hitting their women, but put another man there instead and then they turn into chickens!* (Interview with Maria, 15/4)

Stigmatization

As both Goffman and Parsons argue, societies and their interactions are all built up around common main values, also called norms. Bortolaia Silva describes how lone mothers in old Britain was stigmatized and looked upon as 'bad mothers' since they departure to much from the norm. To become a mother in Guatemala today, without living with the father, is just as in old Britain a shame and a legitimate way of falling outside those shared values. To become a single mother is considered "haciendo un error" (making a mistake) and the mistake is considered being made by the mother. Many of the participating mothers express their feelings of fear when they found out they were pregnant. They were afraid of being judged by their families since they were not living with the fathers of their children, and that their parents would get angry or even forbid them to keep the children. Most of them did. Three of four informants who did not live with the father of their child when they got pregnant were kicked out or rejected by their own families, standing all alone with no money or moral support. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the mothers were, by getting pregnant, departing from the norm in society and directly being rejected by their own parents and family.

The woman is the one who should be restrictive with her body, making sure she does not get pregnant. If she does become pregnant, the pregnancy is viewed as self-earned and therefore the stigmatization of the mothers is perceived as controllable. If a woman gets pregnant, it is a sign of weakness and irresponsibility and the consequence is that she is left out, not only by

society, but also by her own family. This leads to a lot of people, living closer to the main values of society, to start avoiding and stigmatizing the single mother. Natali says that:

There is a lot of discrimination towards single mothers. Some people wouldn't talk to me and a lot of people criticise single mothers. Because a lot of people think that it's a lack of respect to have a child without living with the father. /…/ Just because I have a child doesn't mean that I don't have the right to my own life. The people who are criticising us don't know about the damage they cause. Some mothers really suffer from all the criticism they are exposed to. (Interview with Natali, 28/3)

At the time of the interviews, five of six informants live on their own with only their children as direct kin; only Lourdes still lives with her parents. Not one of the mothers has any financial support from their family, and the fathers of their children never or very seldom provide money. Some of the fathers do not even acknowledge themselves as the biological father of the child. Almost all of the informants have some kind of contact with their parents. In more than one case, the parents only talk to their grandchildren, sometimes assisting in taking care of them, but they still do not talk or interact more than necessary with their daughters. The statements of several of the participating mothers show the double nature of the actions taken by their parents. They still keep a distance to their daughter who made a mistake by getting pregnant, but they care for their grandchildren too much to not see them at all. *"They like him/her too much!"* is a comment made by more than one mother.

Concluding remarks

At the time I went to Guatemala to conduct the study for this thesis, I expected the single mothers to be a very vulnerable and exposed group, since I already was familiar with the patriarchal structures and the common opinion that men should be the family providers. What I did not expect to find was that the parents of the single mothers would reject their own daughters when they became pregnant and chose to raise their children independently. My previous understanding of the Guatemalan society was that it was very male-dominated but still constructed on the basis of very tight-knit families. Those family structures are real, based on norms of two parent families. However, we can also see it in the single mothers'

stories of how their own families reject them, yet they still care for their grandchildren. Obviously those family relationships are strong, but not strong enough for the parents to not stigmatize their daughter.

The findings of this study reinforce what has already been written in the field of machismo and women's roles in a Latin American context. That many women today are stuck in a power struggle, still disadvantaged by their 'biological constitution', is clear in the participating mothers' own stories. The man constitutes the controlling gender, not only politically but also in the family.

In the introducing quote Orloff states that single mothers in exposed situations exemplify the vulnerabilities of all women. However, I would argue in this conclusion that single mothers in the context of my study are actually challenging the morals and values withheld by the machismo structure. More than exemplifying vulnerability, these women show that there might be a way out of oppression from violent and promiscuous men. While single motherhood creates major burdens on the finances and mental health of the mothers, these women appear to be less vulnerable to *machismo* and male violence. As single mothers, they have more freedom to make their own decisions and are becoming more empowered as individuals when they are forced to learn to take care of themselves and their families. Independence from men is very difficult, but for many women in this society, a marriage can create as much or more emotional and physical vulnerability than single motherhood.

While getting one step away from the force of *machismo*, the single mothers are still affected by the superiority of man, and are stigmatized by society for departing from the norm. Yet, I argue, single motherhood in this context is actually an example of a small revolutionary step towards the greater independence of women in this Guatemalan village. Even though the mothers in this thesis suffer a lot of misfortunes and are stigmatized, they are gaining empowerment and financial independence, and are serving as examples of what may become a new norm within this Guatemalan village. Stigmatization and exclusion is a reaction from society showing that the situation of the mother is not acceptable. The fact that the grandparents do not tend to cut the ties with their grandchildren even if the mother is single shows a level of acceptance of the situation, which may improve over time and reduce the level of stigma towards single mothers.

The single mothers with the lowest incomes in this study have the most difficult time changing their own situation and therefore have low self-esteems. Despite this, hope and strength are visible among several of the participating mothers. When speaking to the single mothers, I felt a sense of pride and hope among them, especially among those who have been able to get a job with a stable income. They show their families, friends and the people who stigmatize them that they can make it on their own and provide their children a better future. In a wider sense, the stigmatization of single mothers in Guatemala is just a sign of societal fear that women may be able to be less dependent on men and a part of the economy as income earners. At the same time, while they are fighting for the survival of their family and children, they are also slowly breaking their own stigma, and with doing that they might be able to slowly affect the societal view on women as a whole.

As mentioned previously, this study only focused on the viewpoints of the single mothers themselves. For further studies it would be very interesting to dig deeper into the question of gender roles in general in Guatemala today. Extending this study to also include men, married women and parents of single mothers would add a lot more to the understanding of why single mothers are being stigmatized and excluded from society, and it may also reveal whether these views are changing towards greater acceptance of single women and women who are financially independent. It would also be interesting to explore the differences between the view on women and motherhood in different social and economic settings within the same country.

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Appendix – interview guide with single mothers

Lo basico

Cómo se llama Usted?

Cuántos años tiene Usted?

Cuántos niños tiene Usted?

Ha vivido Usted con el padre del/ de los niño/-s?

Porqué vive sin el padre del/de los niño/-s ahora?

Cómo vive Usted ahora? Con su/-s niño/-s? Con más personas?

Cómo puede mantener a Usted y su/-s hijo/-s?

Tiene Usted alguien que le ayuda con el/los niño/-s?

Tiene Usted alguien que le ayuda con dinero?

Usted ha estudiado? Por cuántos años?

Su/-s hijo/-s va/-n a estudiar?

Personal

Tiene Usted todo lo que quiere? Si no, qué les falta?

Tiene Usted tiempo suficiente para estar con su/-s niño/-s?

Puede pedir ayuda Usted de alguien para ayudar a Usted y el/los hijo/-s?

Quería recibir algún ayuda para mantener a Usted y su/-s hijo/-s? Si responde que si, qué tipo de ayuda?

Cómo le trata gente si les dice Usted que está madre soltera?

Hay situaciónes cuando no quiere decir a gente que su hijo/-s no tiene/-n papá?

Hay algún vez cuándo Usted se siente poderoso? Si no, cómo puede sentir poderoso Usted?

Qué es lo positivi/negativo de vivir sin esposo/hombre?

Ha sacrificado algo Usted por ser madre?

Valoración

Qué significa ser madre?

Qué significa ser padre?

Qué significa estar casada?

Quién tiene la responsabilidad de los niños?

Cuándo no hay padre/hombre, que falta por la familia?

Que es machismo?

Usted se siente como un parte de la sociedad?

Cuándo fue el último vez que le sentí usted orgulloso por algo? Quiere contarme de eso usted?

Qué piense usted del futuro? Qué hace usted en diez años? Dónde vive usted? Qué hace su/-s hijo/-s?

Qué es el sueño de usted?